

HIGHLANDER'S BEAUTIFUL LIAR

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Contents

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Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Highlander's Ancient Vengeance

Prologue

Chapter 1 - Confrontation

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Prologue

The whole situation was preposterous. Cora swallowed hard and stared at the man in front of her. He was a hulking older man and looked uncomfortable in the small confining carriage space. He was a virtual stranger, but the more she studied him, the more familiar he looked.

She had the same hazel-colored eyes that her friends said looked so good with the new pastel fashion. His were older, harder, and when they swept over her, she could sense the pity in them. He knew he was usurping her from her home. They both had auburn hair, although her hair didn't get as red as his until she'd spent some time under the summer sun. Her guardians used to admonish her for basking in the sun, but she loved it. The same straight nose. At least now she knew who to blame for that. From what she remembered of her mother, she had the daintiest button nose. Her mother had been a beautiful woman, but Cora more resembled the man in front of her.

Not sure what to do in the silence of the carriage, she unfolded the letter that was crumpled in her hand and reread it.

"Cora," the older man said softly, "I know this is a wee bit strange." His thick Scottish brogue was foreign to her ears. She'd heard tales of the wild highland men, but his was the first that she'd ever met.

"A wee bit strange?" she exclaimed. "Surely you realize this is more than strange. Two days ago, I was Cora Isles and about to enter my third season. Now I'm the illegitimate daughter of a Scottish laird and betrothed to a complete stranger!"

Duncan MacKay reached across to take her hand. "If I had known that this would happen, I would never have approached my King. You must believe me." He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Yer

guardians were kind?"

Calvin and Donna Thistle were more than kind. They took her in when she was eight after her mother had died. Together, with their daughter Lana, they were her family. Cora's family history made it difficult for her to find a husband, but Calvin had promised her that she'd be taken care of no matter what happened. The Thistles were her parents, and Lana was her younger sister. They'd all cried when Duncan showed up to declare his daughter and whisk her away to the harsh Highlands.

"They love me," she said with great difficulty. "And I love them."

Duncan watched her with sadness in his eyes. "That's good. I looked into them when ye became their ward. I hoped they'd be good to ye. It saddens me to take ye away, but I have to think of my clan."

Cora shook her head. "I find it very hard to believe that your clan would want an English bride at the head of its table. If you want this Innes Campbell to be their laird, why not just make it so? Why force him to marry me?"

"If I could, I would. I doona take this action lightly. I approached the matter to King Edward, but he wants MacKay blood to rule. My son is cruel, and my clan would suffer at his hands. Cora, yer my only option."

"Your people hate the English. They'd never accept me no matter whom I married," she pointed out.

"They'll come around." He smiled gently. "How could they not? Yer my daughter. Yer kind and bonnie. Ye will win them over. I know it."

"And Innes Campbell?" Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "Is he kind?" She was aware of the famous Scottish temper and brutality. It terrified her to think of marrying one.

"I've known Innes his whole life. He and my son are friends, but they are verra different. He'll be a good husband. I'll see to it. I promise."

Cora fidgeted nervously. The past few days felt like a whirlwind, but it gave her an opportunity that she'd never had before. "Do you remember my mother?"

He pressed his lips into a thin line and sat back. "Ye ask that with trepidation."

"I'm not naive," she said dully. "I know what she was. I've heard it all my life. I'm the daughter of a whore, but to me she was strong and beautiful. She loved me, and she protected me. She made sure I had a real chance at life."

"Aye," Duncan said with a snort. "She was strong and beautiful. I fancied myself in love with her."

Cora blinked in surprise. "You knew her more than a single night?"

"Before I became laird, I had to make several trips to London for some business. Yer mother made those insufferable trips enjoyable. I fell for her and offered to save her from that life. She rebuffed me and..." His voice trailed off.

"And you could not claim the illegitimate daughter of a whore until you had use for her?" she asked hotly. "If it were not for the summons of my own King, I would not be here. Do not mistake my compliance for daughterly duty."

"I deserve that. And more," Duncan said hoarsely. "I only hope that in time, ye will come to see how much I love ye."

"Did you ask her to marry you? My mother?"

Duncan hesitated. "I was married at the time," he admitted. "And I had a young son. The best I could offer her was to be my mistress. I would have kept her safe and comfortable."

"That's not love. You treated her no better than anyone else. How could I believe that you love me?" She shook her head angrily. "No. We shan't speak of this again. I'll do as I've been ordered to do, but I'll not discuss your idea of fatherly love."

"Cora, sweetheart." He closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry. This is not what I had in mind when I went to my King. I hope, one day, you'll forgive me."

Ignoring him, she stared out the window. The sun had long ago set below the horizon, but she could still see the silhouettes and shadows

cast by the full bright moon. They had passed the city and were well into the country. Cora had never been outside London and watched the passing landscape with fascination. Despite her hesitation, the idea of the adventure that waited before her was thrilling. She'd long ago suspected that she'd never marry, and now she'd have her chance. It wasn't like she was leaving a slew of friends behind her, but leaving the Thistles did break her heart.

The carriage suddenly halted. There was a piercing scream that cut through the night. Cora gasped and pressed herself into the corner. "Highway robbery?"

"Not my carriage," Duncan growled. He moved to protect her from the entrance. Filled with fear, Cora crumpled the letter in her hand and waited. Nothing happened. "Wait here."

"No, don't!" she cried out, but he was already exiting the carriage.

"Father," another voice said cheerfully. "So good of ye to join us."

"Seth? What the bloody hell are ye doing? What have ye done to my men?"

"Did ye really think ye could replace me? I'm wounded. Have I not been a good son?" There was a hollow laugh. "Yer desperate actions were for naught. All ye've done is secure the execution of my dear half-sister."

"Seth, please."

"Ye have never loved me. Ye think me cruel and reckless, but ye are just too weak to appreciate my ambition. Ye wanted to take my inheritance away from me, and now ye will pay the price. Goodbye, Father." There was a horrible sound of a blade sinking into flesh followed by a guttural moan. Cora pressed her hand against her lips and stifled a cry.

It didn't matter. The door flew open, and rough hands grabbed her and dragged her from the carriage. "Unhand me," she demanded, but her bravery left her when she saw Duncan MacKay's body.

The father that she'd only known for two days was dead. Slain by his own son. She was next.

Meeting the cold stare of Seth MacKay, she swallowed hard. Duncan had called him cruel, but that didn't even come close to explaining the maniacal glee she saw in his eyes.

"So yer my English sister? Tell me, my dear sister, are ye a whore like yer mother?" he demanded.

She straightened her back. His friend was openly staring at her with lust in his eyes. "Go to hell," she hissed.

"My, my, my," Seth mocked. "Such a dirty mouth for a dainty English lady."

"You just murdered your father! How dare you judge me?" she yelled.

Seth shrugged. "I don't see ye shedding tears for our dearly departed father. Besides, I have my clan to think about."

"You don't care about your clan. You care about power. Don't mistake the two, and don't think that anyone else does."

"Ye think that I care of yer opinion?" he sneered. "Time to join our father."

He raised his sword, and Cora closed her eyes. She refused to give him the satisfaction of screaming.

"Wait!" his companion said suddenly. "I rather like her."

She opened her eyes, and the other man stepped forward and grinned. He was handsome with thick locks of blond hair and dark eyes, but he wore the same cruel expression as Seth. She knew that whatever he said next would not be in her best interest. "She's supposed to be mine, and I want her. Let me have her."

"And lose my clan?" Seth snapped. "Must I kill you too, Innes?"

"Innes?" Cora gasped. Her stomach turned, and she felt ill. "God."

"Yer clan has no idea who she is. We'll imprison her, and when we've taken care of my brother and I'm laird, ye'll give her to me."

Seth snorted. "Ye want to marry her? Ye just met her."

"Look at her," Innes urged. "Ye'll not find anyone more bonnie in

either of our clans. I want her.”

“Ye can have her right now. Ye don’t have to marry her to slake yer lust. Have at it. We have time.”

Swallowing hard, she jutted out her chin and met his gaze. She would not whimper or beg for mercy. She would not show fear. Innes sneered and reached down to stroke her cheek. “I want more than to bed her for the night. She isn’t just a beauty. She has the potential to be a wild ride. I want to break her. I want her to carry my name, to wither under my control.”

Cora felt like a piece of meat between two wolves. It took all her strength not to be sick right then and there. “She’s a witness. I can’t let her live,” Seth argued.

“I’m sure we can keep her in line. There must be something she cares about.”

Cora’s eyes widened as she thought of the Thistles. Lana. Dear God, she had to protect them! Seth watched her reaction and grinned.

“Verra well, but ye will have to find a replacement for her body. Cora Isles must die tonight.”

Her would-be husband grabbed her, and this time, she did lose it. In the face of her future, she leaned forward and vomited on him.

Howling in rage, he struck her hard, and she knew nothing else.

Six Months Later

The afternoon sky was clear as the sun touched everything as far as the eye could see. Alec Sinclair and his warriors waited patiently behind the ridge to the MacKay lands as their scouts rode forward to see if Seth MacKay was wise of their plans.

“Ye look stiff, Connor,” Alec teased with a wry smile. His older brother shot him a cold look.

“This is an important day for ye, Alec,” Connor snapped. “Ye should take it more seriously.”

“Aye, I do. But I also know that Seth MacKay, even when he’s sober, is no match for us. If he’s smart, he’ll step down. If not, he’ll die,” Alec said simply. He patted the pouch around his waist as if to ensure that it was actually there and it wasn’t just a dream.

Connor Sinclair, as the oldest son, had been groomed to be laird of the Sinclair lands since birth. When their father died, Connor stepped easily into his new position, and Alec took over training the men. Everything was fine. As the younger brother, he had more freedom. He was still heir, but Connor would marry soon and produce a son. Other than his loyalty to the Sinclairs, Alec had no real responsibilities. He didn’t even realize that he was unhappy until the letter came for him.

It was no secret that Seth MacKay was rapidly ruining his clan. Word had somehow reached King Edward of the real damage Seth was doing, and Edward stepped in. Seth was to step down as laird and Alec Sinclair take his place.

Taking over another clan simply wasn't done. Alec knew that the job wouldn't be easy. The MacKays would no doubt balk at having a Sinclair as their leader. He would have to take them in hand, retrain their men, and rebuild their strength all while dealing with a clan that didn't want him. This moment, with his brother, might be the last chance he had to feel at ease for a long while.

"Connor, ye should have taken my offer to bed Dolly," his friend Shane said as he clapped him on his back. "Perhaps ye wouldn't feel too uptight."

"Her name is Ginny, and I should have taken you up on it if only to make sure that she had a good time last night," Connor snorted.

Alec roared with laughter and even his brother finally smiled. It was rare to see Connor so relaxed. Although the Sinclair clan was in good shape, the responsibility weighed heavily on his brother's shoulders.

Or maybe rearing their little sister, Grace, was taking its toll on them. The girl had been a hellion all her eighteen years, and the loss of their father hadn't slowed her down in the least.

"Aye, Ginny was the first girl to warm my bed, and Bonnie was the last. I assure you, they both had quite a good time," Shane retorted with a wink.

Alec was about to join in on the banter when his horse pricked his ears. Straightening in his saddle, he raised his hands to silence the men as Jamie and Stephen returned.

"No sign of any activity," Jamie said with a frown. "We could see the crops. They're in poor shape. I shudder to think of what we will find when we breach the keep."

Alec nodded. "Verra well. We give Seth MacKay a choice."

All traces of amusement fled the men as they straightened. They knew things could go one of two ways. The MacKays could surrender and there would be no bloodshed. Or they'd be forced to fight.

Spurning his horse forward, he clenched his jaw as he led the men over the ridge. Every man was different when they faced battle. Shane relieved his tensions with women the night before and held their

pleasure in his mind as a reason to fight. Stephen was always spoiling for a battle, and Jamie was loyal until his last breath. He'd ride into the mouth of hell itself for Connor and Alec.

His older brother did everything for duty, but Alec felt almost nothing before battle. A strange sense of peace and calm settled over him. Gone was his pride that his King had chosen him. Gone was the fear that he wouldn't be good enough. All that was left was the goal.

Take down Seth MacKay.

By the time they made it to the crumbling keep, Seth had been alerted. They were greeted by a sad looking group of men.

Alec swept his eyes over them dispassionately. It was clear that they were loyal to their land, but most were on foot rather than horses, and it was obvious that most of his army were still young and untrained.

"What is the meaning of this, Sinclair?" Seth snarled as he weaved on his horse. It was obvious that the man was drunk but then, from what Alec heard, he stayed in that condition.

"I'm not here of my own volition, MacKay," Connor said quietly. "Yer poor treatment of yer clan has reached the highest level."

Connor nodded at Alec, and he stepped forward with the letter. "Seth, I have here a missive from King Edward. Step down as laird, and face the consequences of yer actions in court. The Sinclair warriors are here to see that you comply."

"Poor treatment?" Seth spat. "Lies! I have done nothing but treat my people fairly. I'll not be going anywhere with you."

"Verra well," Alec said softly as he slid his sword from his sheath. "We have no choice. Let it be known that whoever fights with this man today will do so against the orders of the King."

He didn't expect it to make the men back down. They had been taught since birth to be loyal to their laird no matter what the situation, and it was clear that today they would do just that. Alec knew his men well, and he knew they would be as compassionate as possible. Only those that could not be subdued would die today.

“Kill them!” Seth screamed, and his men flew into action. Alec tensed, but he ignored everything around him. He only had eyes for Seth.

By the time Alec got within striking distance, the man fled. Gritting his teeth, Alec raced after him. If there was one thing he hated, it was a coward.

Pulling his horse up short, he slid off the beast and ran up the steps after Seth as the man tried desperately to make it to the tower. Unfortunately for him, he was too drunk to move quickly; Alec grabbed him by the shoulders, turned him around, and slammed him into the stone wall.

“Don’t think I haven’t seen what ye’ve done to these people. Some of the structures are burnt to the ground, the crops are withered, and while they starve, ye are getting rather fat around the middle. Ye deserve the hanging that awaits ye,” Alec snarled. “These people looked to ye, and ye have betrayed them.”

“Ye cannae have my clan!” Seth bellowed. He pulled a dirk from behind him and thrust it forward. Alec moved quickly and had no choice but to bring his sword down.

The man slid to the floor with a low moan and was dead in seconds. Anger washed over Alec. The man had deserved to die in front of hundreds but instead had chosen the coward’s way out.

Reining in his disgust, he strode back out to his horse and rode back to the battlefields. It looked like the Sinclair warriors had everything well in hand.

“Yer laird is dead,” Alec bellowed. “By orders of the King, ye will swear yer fealty to me or ye will find yerself without a clan. Make yer choice wisely.”

The fighting stopped instantly, and there was a mix of emotions on the men’s faces. Most of them looked relieved, but some just stared at him in disbelief, as though he were mad to think they would ever declare their loyalties to him.

One by one, they dropped their swords. It was enough for now. “Who takes responsibility for these men now?”

A hulking man with dark hair and an angry scowl stepped forward. "I'm Kane."

"Kane. Come with me. I want a tour of these lands. Everyone else, gather the people. I'll address everyone when I am ready."

He didn't look pleased, but Kane did as Alec asked. Silently, they rode side by side through the lands with Shane, Jamie, and Stephen behind them.

"I donnae want this transition to be difficult," Alec said quietly. "I want ye to know that this has nothing to do with transgressions in the past. I mean to strengthen this clan, and I'll need yer help to do that. So tell me, Kane. Will ye be fighting me every step of the way, or do ye care enough about yer clan to help me?"

"Seth was no prince, but ye have no right to step in. A MacKay should rule. To abide another is unthinkable," Kane said shortly.

"Tis not my choice to be here. I have been summoned by the King, and ye will step aside for the verra same reason. Be the bridge that I need, Kane. Help me."

Before the man could respond, they were quickly joined by a dozen warriors who didn't wear the MacKay colors. Alec recognized their leader and immediately curled his lip in disgust. "Innes Campbell. What might ye be doing here?"

"The MacKays are our allies. If ye have slain Seth MacKay, it will be the last thing ye ever do," Innes growled. He was the younger brother of Mac Campbell, laird, but Alec knew his kind well. When he spoke on behalf of the laird, he was most likely interjecting his own wishes in the decree.

"I'm here by order of King Edward. We gave Seth MacKay a chance to ride peacefully to court. He rather violently declined the offer. I would not make a move against us if I were ye," Alec said coldly. While Innes's older brother Mac was a respectable laird, Innes was just as much of a weasel as his friend Seth. King Edward made it clear that if Alec could not take the clan in hand, the job would be given to Innes.

It was just as clear that King Edward didn't want that, so Alec could

only imagine the King's anger if he failed.

Innes held out his hand expectantly, and Alec reluctantly gave him the letter. He didn't want Innes to get his grubby hands on the paper much less on the clan itself. Although they were MacKay allies, the people deserved better.

The vile man grunted his disapproval and handed the letter back. "Fine. But that doesn't mean that I have to leave. The MacKays will continue to have the Campbells as allies, but donnae expect that loyalty to extend to ye."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Alec muttered as he put the letter safely back in his satchel. "Do as ye will. I'm trying to discern how much damage yer friend has wreaked on his people. Feel free to join me. Perhaps ye can explain just what the hell Seth MacKay was thinking."

Innes narrowed his eyes in anger, but he urged his horse into step with Alec and his men.

Alec ignored him completely. His first step to win over the clan was with Kane, and that was his only focus.



The water trickled down the walls as it mocked her. Cora's throat was so dry, and yet, in Alec's last bout of cruelty, he'd chained her to the middle of the prison so that she couldn't reach the walls.

It was demeaning to lick the walls like an animal, but she would have done it in a heartbeat. There were days when she thought that if dying was her only means of escape, she would gladly take it. Then she thought of her family, her sister, and knew that she couldn't give up. She needed to protect them.

Seth and Innes were careful. When they came to visit her, they made it very clear what would happen if she made a sound, and they never left a mark that could be seen outside her dress. She didn't know why they would take such care unless they were afraid of what would happen if word got out that the two men were regularly beating on a prisoner, and a female one at that. She didn't even know what they'd

told the guards she'd done.

At the very least, they hadn't taken her virtue. For all of Innes's cruelty, it was apparent that he wanted a virgin on his wedding night. A shudder of disgust ran down her spine as she remembered the last thing he'd whispered in her ear.

Soon.

Obviously they'd thought that enough time had passed that no one would suspect her to be Cora Isles. Soon she'd be wedded to Innes. Her torture would continue, but at the very least, she'd be out of the prison.

She could plot her escape. She could make sure that her sister was safe, and they'd live out their lives far away from Scotland. If she'd learned one thing in the past six months, it was that highlanders were never to be trusted.

Rolling her shoulders, she winced. She was quickly losing feeling in her hands and arms as they hung above her head. They stretched the muscles in her back, and she was aware of every bruise and cut on her skin, every crack in her ribs.

Seth had chained her up hours ago. When did he expect to return? Her hands and arms were going numb.

There was a sudden flicker of light around the corner, and she stiffened. As much as she wanted to be released from the chains, she knew that Seth would find some reason to beat her more.

"How many prisoners are currently housed down here?" a strange voice asked.

"Who the bloody hell are you? Where is Laird MacKay?"

The voices lowered, and Cora strained to hear what they had to say. Finally, the light moved around the corner, and Cora's eyes opened.

Seth wasn't with them, but Innes Campbell was, and there was a deadly coldness in his eyes. Whatever was happening, Innes was not pleased about it.

The man clearly in charge was a big man, but that was nothing new. It

seemed that all highlanders were big men. The better to beat women for.

Long dark hair framed his large rugged face, and there was blood splattered on his shirt and the tartan of his kilt. Even through her pain and exhaustion, she noted that he did not wear the MacKay colors or the Campbell colors.

Had Seth and Innes sent someone new to torture her?

His face was different though. Cora couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was something strange in his dark eyes. Perhaps kindness? Pity? Would she even recognize it if she saw it again? He looked over her curiously, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"She's a thief you say? What's her name?" he asked slowly.

Her guard shrugged. "No idea. I'm not to speak to her."

"What did she steal?"

"I doonae know that either."

Alec growled angrily. "Do you happen to know how long she's been strung up like that?"

"Several hours. Laird MacKay is punishing her."

"How long has she been here?"

"Six months."

"Then what could she possibly have done to warrant this?" The new man shook his head. "Release her. Now," he ordered.

The guard hesitated, but the hard look that the new man gave him was enough for him to fumble with the keys. Once the bars were open, all three men stepped into her prison. The guard unlocked the chains around her wrist, and her arms dropped heavily by her side. Immediately, she stumbled and fell.

The new man stepped forward and caught her. "Easy," he murmured in her ear. "I've got ye."

Cora couldn't help it. Even though the arms around her were gentle,

she still stiffened. He noticed, but he didn't let her go.

"Seth MacKay is dead," he said softly.

Relief swept through her, but it was short-lived. Her eyes fell on Innes, and she knew it wasn't over. Just because one of her captors was dead didn't mean that the other one was any less deadly.

"My name is Alec Sinclair," he continued, still speaking as though he were afraid that he'd scare her. "I am current acting laird of the MacKays. Can ye tell me yer name, lass?"

She opened her mouth to tell him the truth, but suddenly, all she could see was Innes. He shook his head slowly and mouthed a single word to her.

Lana.

Her stomach twisted, and she squeezed her eyes shut. "Claire," she said finally. "My name is Claire."

"Yer English," Alec said in surprise. "What the bloody hell are ye doing here?"

Wasn't that a story that he would love to hear? Clamping her mouth shut, she kept silent.

"Can ye tell me what ye stole, lass?" Alec asked as he watched her closely. Cora had never been very good at lying, and she couldn't risk saying anything in front of Innes.

So she said nothing.

Alec sighed and picked her up. She gasped as he swept her up in his arms, and clenched her teeth against the pain from her bruises.

"She's a thief!" Innes growled. "What do ye think ye are doing?"

"Can ye tell me what ye stole? Cause if no one can tell me what she's doing here, then I'm not going to keep her here. The woman is obviously in need of a healer. If I discover later that she is indeed a criminal, I'll deal with her accordingly," Alec hissed.

Maybe it was the realization that she was finally getting away from the dungeon, or maybe it was the hope that she had an ally, but Cora

felt herself slowly sinking into the man's embrace. He was strong and warm, and although he wore a hard expression on his face, she found him strangely handsome.

Lord, she wasn't attractive to him, was she?

Looking over Alec's shoulder, she saw Innes following them with a grim look on his face. She knew that she could tell everyone what he'd done.

What Seth had done.

But then she'd risk Innes following through on his threat to hurt Lana. The girl was only fourteen, and the Thistles had no idea the danger she was in. They'd never be able to protect her.

Lana was more important than Cora. She was a beautiful girl with a bright future ahead of her. Even if Cora had been able to find a husband who was okay with her mother's occupation, no one would have her after being held in a highlander prison for six months.

No one would believe that she remained a virgin.

No, her future was ruined. She'd take whatever she could get now, and she'd keep Innes's secret.

For Lana.

Alec crossed his arms as the healer examined Cora. She shrunk back whenever the older woman tried to touch her, and he couldn't tell if it was because she was afraid or hiding something.

"Aye," the healer said finally as she stood. "She'll live. Plenty of rest, and she'll need to put some meat on those bones."

Cora didn't say anything but watched him closely. He pulled the healer out and closed the door. "What do you know of her?"

"I knew there was a lass in the prisons, but I dinnae know who or why. Laird MacKay and Innes Campbell would go down there frequently to visit her."

"Did they hurt her?" he asked quietly. For some reason, he felt protective over the prisoner. Even if she was a thief, she didn't deserve their particular brand of cruelty. "Did they rape her?"

The healer shrugged. "She says she's fine, but she wilnae let me examine her. Not to speak ill of Seth MacKay, but from the way that she reacts to my touch, I'd wager that she's been beaten. Is it true what they say? That you killed Laird MacKay?"

"Go join everyone else below. I'll address the whole clan at once," he said sternly. He didn't like having to repeat himself over and over again.

He'd sent Innes downstairs as well. He could tell that the sight of the man distressed the prisoner, even if he didn't know why. Turning to the guard at the door, he frowned. "What's yer name?"

"Hoyt."

"Well, Hoyt, since there are no more prisoners in the dungeons, ye'll

guard her. No one but the maid is allowed in and out, and if Innes Campbell tries to get near her, ye let me know.”

“And if she tries to escape?”

“She’s not a prisoner anymore,” Alec said sharply. “But I want her to rest, and I want her protected, so no. She’s not to leave the room until I return.”

Hoyt looked dubious, but he nodded. Alec strode downstairs.

He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so furious, but when he discovered the auburn-haired beauty strung up in the prison, the whole world had darkened. It was cruel to leave anyone in that position, let alone a woman. She was far too skinny for his taste, but there was still life in her gorgeous green eyes. A flicker of hatred and temper. He wanted to tempt her into flaring out and giving him a taste of what she was capable of, but she was still strangely quiet.

Claire.

They both knew that she was lying. If she’d tell him nothing else, it was doubtful that she’d give him her real name. He wanted the woman to trust him. He’d be gentle with her, give her whatever she needed, until she finally decided to tell him the truth.

And if she was a criminal? What then?

There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that she’d already paid for her crimes and then some under the hands of Seth and Innes. But she didn’t look beaten, so maybe there really was something else going on.

Crowded on the field just outside the keep, the MacKay clan waited. They were all a sight. There had been rumors that most of the younger MacKay men, those that could fight back against Alec’s rule, were either killed or exiled. The ones that remained were forced to pledge their loyalties or join their mates, so there were precious few left. It was obvious that the boys were forced to grow up way too quickly. Pride flashed in their eyes, showing that they’d shouldered their new responsibility without complaint, and resignation resided with their mothers, as though they knew they didn’t have a choice.

They should have hated Seth, but Alec knew that even if they did,

they'd never admit it to him. He was an outsider, and now he was in charge.

"Listen to me," he shouted forcefully. "Aye, the rumors are true. Seth MacKay is dead. I am Alec Sinclair, and I have been ordered by the King to take control of this clan. Ye will respect me, and in turn, I will respect ye. Make no mistake that I will be watched closely by the King, and if he does not see the results that he wants, there will be another. And another. If ye don't want that, ye will do as I say. I am here to strengthen yer warriors to protect you against attack. I am here to help ye rebuild yer homes and restock yer kitchens. If ye cannot abide my presence, then ye should leave now, because I doonna plan to go anywhere. The Sinclair clan is large and robust, and they will share their resources to help ye get on yer feet. Ye will respect their presence on yer land, and I'll not hear of any fighting or cruelty. Do we have an understanding?"

He could read the crowd and see the contempt, but no one dared to speak out against him. He had a feeling that, in time, that would change. As they regained their resources, they would regain their pride, but that was a risk he was willing to take. In time, he would win them over.

"Good. Shane, Jamie, and Stephen are my three top men. They will be coming around to hear yer most pressing needs. Kane here is also to act as an ambassador. He will always have my ear if ye have something that ye need to say. Now, it's been a long day. Normally I'd suggest a celebration dinner, but I doubt there's enough food for that. Go home, get some rest. I promise that tomorrow, ye'll see some changes."

More than a few grumbled under their breath as they dispersed. Kane had nothing but fire in his eyes as he shook his head.

"Do ye have something that ye want to say to me?" Alec said as he crossed his arms.

"No," Kane grunted.

"No, what?" Alec challenged.

Kane's eyes widened in horror, and for a moment, Alec thought that

the man would deny him. “No..my Laird,” Kane choked out finally.

It was hardly a win considering that the words were practically dripping with poison, but Alec let it go. Waving his hand, he dismissed Kane and waited for Innes to approach him.

“I’d like to stay the night and make sure there are no fights breaking out,” Innes said politely.

It was a strange request, and it aroused suspicion in Alec. He immediately shook his head. “No. I don’t have enough food in storage to feed the clan, let alone you. I’ll send word if I have need for you.”

Innes opened his mouth to protest, but Alec was already walking away. Pulling Stephen aside, he cast another glance Innes’s way. The man looked absolutely furious.

“Escort the Campbells off the land,” he said in a low voice. “I’m not willing to start a war with them, but they are not welcome to return unannounced. There is something fishy going on here, and I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

“Aye, Laird,” Stephen said as he flashed a grin. “It sounds good to call ye that.”

Alec nodded and clapped his friend on the back. “I cannae lie. It sounds good to hear it.”

Everyone dispersed, and he took a moment to glance around the keep. He’d never thought that it was possible, but here he was, laird of a clan. It wouldn’t be like ruling the Sinclairs. It would be a rough road, but Alec was up to the challenge. If nothing else, he wanted to prove himself worthy to the King.

Worthy to his brother.

And worthy to himself.



A few hours later, Alec met his brother at the storage buildings. It looked as though Seth had taken the majority of the crops and game of the keep. There was more than enough to keep them fed, so they

had a normal dinner and divided the rest of the food among the clan. If the MacKays were grateful, they certainly didn't say anything. Finally, everyone retired to their chambers.

Too amped to sleep, Alec roamed the halls. His thoughts kept returning to the beautiful prisoner, and he told himself that he was well within his rights to visit her. He'd exchanged the guard for another and nodded to him as he knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he eased it open.

"Claire?" he asked softly. "'Tis Alec."

There was a single candle lit, and she was curled up in the corner of the mattress. His entry hadn't awoken her, and he took a moment to look her over.

She was such a small thing. Alec couldn't imagine her lasting a day in the prisons, let alone months. Just how had an Englishwoman made her way into the Highlands, and what the hell had she come to steal? This wasn't like the streets of London. She couldn't pickpocket her way for a living, so if they were calling her a thief, it only made sense that she was after something in particular. Seth MacKay had plenty of valuables in the keep, but he couldn't imagine any of them would gain her attention.

Suddenly, she jerked and cried out. Even in her sleep, he could see the fear on her face. She was in the throes of a nightmare, another remnant left over from Seth MacKay. He feared that if he woke her, she would be even more frightened to see him standing over her, but he would not leave her like this. Instead, he gently set a hand on her shoulder. "'Tis all right, lass. Seth cannae hurt ye anymore. Sleep, Claire. Sleep."

At the sound of his voice, she stopped thrashing, but she didn't wake. Slowly, he removed his hand and settled in a chair by the bed to watch her and make sure she slept peacefully.

"What's yer story?" he asked her softly.

Although he knew it wasn't right, he ached to join her in bed. He wanted to cup the swell of her breast and run his thumb over the fabric covering her nipple. He wanted to nuzzle her neck until she

moaned and offered him her mouth. He wanted to taste her, to see if she was as sweet as she looked.

Growling softly, he backed away from the room. What the hell was he thinking? He couldn't be fantasizing. He had an uphill battle in front of him, and he certainly couldn't afford to obsess about a woman he didn't even know. *Bloody hell!*

Safely outside the hall, he closed the door and swept a hand through his hair. Clearly, roaming the halls was dangerous. He needed to go to bed. Alone.



Connor left the next morning and took the majority of the men with him. Left with a couple dozen Sinclair warriors, he started the process of retraining the men.

“Seth MacKay had enemies,” he roared to the men on the field. “That does not go away simply because I’m in charge. They may see this moment as a weakness, and we need to be ready. Divide yerselves in groups of four and five, and train with my men. They are the best, so heed them well. In a couple of weeks, I expect to see vast improvement. I doonae want to hear any complaining. Ye need to toughen up. Yer men, so act like it!”

“This is not how we trained before,” Kane muttered as he shook his head. “They aren’t going to want to take orders from a Sinclair.”

“Good thing that I doonae give a damn what they want,” Alec said mildly. “What I care about is that they are able to protect their clan if there is an attack. Tell me, how often did Seth train with these boys?”

“They’re naught boys,” Kane said fiercely.

“Please,” Alec sneered. “Half of your army cannae even grow facial hair. I’ll be sending a missive throughout the clans to see if any MacKay wants to return, but I doubt it’ll do much good. Until I see improvement, ye’ll train as I say, as often as I say.”

He could tell that Kane was angry, but the man didn’t argue. Feeling almost sorry for the position that he was in, Alec relented just a little.

“Pick a handful of warriors,” he muttered. “This afternoon, two of my men will take another handful out hunting. Yer welcome to join them.”

Kane looked surprised by the offer. “Aye.”

“I watched ye in battle. Yer impressive with a sword. Choose yer own group to train for today,” Alec ordered. Normally he reveled in the training, but today he wanted to watch to see who knew what they were doing, and who needed help. After a few days of observing, the real training would begin.

Catching Stephen’s eye, he pulled him away from the fights. “Did Innes Campbell say anything when he left?” he asked in a low voice.

“Aye. He said that ye were a fool for thinking that ye could take over the clan without his help. He said his offer to be a close ally wouldn’t last for long.”

Alec snorted. “The man doesn’t want to be an ally. He wants to gain my trust so that when he betrays me, I won’t see it coming. He knows that if I fail, he’ll get to step in, and I doonna even care how much this clan hates me. I wilnae see it fall into the hands of Innes Campbell.”

“He also says yer a fool for trusting the thief. What’s he talking about?”

Alec remained silent for a moment. He hadn’t told any of his men about Claire. “When I investigated the prisons, there was a woman strung up in chains. Guard says she’s been there for a few months, and I have a feeling she was Seth and Innes’s play thing. All they’ll say is that she was a thief, but she wilnae say anything, only that her name is Claire.” He paused. “She’s English.”

“English?” Stephen asked with a start. “She must be married then. No other reason for her to be here.”

“She flinches whenever men are near, so I doubt it. I put her in one of the chambers to heal. There are no marks on her that I can tell, but the daft woman won’t let a healer examine her. If she won’t talk, the best I can do is give her work in the keep.”

“Why not release her?”

Alec didn't want to admit that he wasn't ready for the woman to leave just yet. He wanted to pry her secrets out of her. "She could verra well be a criminal. I want to keep an eye on her."

"Is she bonnie?" Stephen asked with a grin. "Perhaps ye just want to keep her close."

"I'm not stupid," Alec snapped. "Go train yer men."

Stephen laughed openly and shook his head. "I can't wait to meet this Claire. Anyone who has ye so vexed is worthy of my attention."

"Ye will stay away from her," Alec said fiercely. "I mean it, Stephen. Ye will not take her to bed."

It only made Stephen laugh harder as he walked away, and Alec regretted opening up to his friend. No doubt the man would talk, and soon all of his friends would be teasing him.

After practice was over, he'd go back to Claire and make a decision about her. Maybe Stephen was right. Maybe he should just give the woman her freedom and be done with it. It would certainly make his life easier.



It was the first time that Cora had slept in a bed in ages, and while her stomach had growled at the full tray of breakfast, she was only able to eat a few bites. Any more, and she knew that she'd be sick. It would take some time for her body to heal, but it was a good start.

Fear from her nightmares lingered. The horrid dreams had haunted her for most of the night, but she was free from the prison, and as long as she did not have to go back, she would be all right. Deep down, she knew that.

Alec Sinclair. She watched from the window as he trained his men. Tall and rugged, he was everything that she'd expected a highlander to be. Like Seth and Innes, he was a terrifying man to look at, but unlike them, she couldn't stop looking.

She liked the way that his sculpted muscles rippled when he moved.

He was impressive in a fight, and she couldn't help the stirring in her body when she watched him.

God help her, she was attracted to the man. It was a dangerous notion considering that he could very well be just like Seth and Innes. Just because he'd freed her didn't mean she should trust him. If he discovered who she was and what her father had wanted, he could kill her.

Or marry her.

Frankly, neither idea sat well with her. So she'd keep her secrets and search for a way out. If she could, she'd leave all of this behind and flee to London. The Thistles would continue to care for her. She knew it in her heart they'd never abandon her.

As the men left the fields and trickled back to their homes, she walked back over to the bed and stretched out. The pain in her ribs still hurt her something fierce, and the bruises were turning a bright purple, but even the few bites of the hearty breakfast was enough to fuel her. She wanted desperately to walk around, but she knew that the guard at the door would never allow it.

Cora didn't know how much time passed before there was a knock at the door. Assuming it was the guard with dinner, she straightened herself. "Enter."

When the door opened, it wasn't the guard but Alec himself carrying a tray of food. Her eyes flew open in alarm, and she fought the urge to climb back to the corner of the bed.

"Claire," he said softly. She blinked in confusion until she remembered the fake name that she'd given him. "How are ye feeling?"

Licking her lips, she watched as he set the tray on the edge of the bed and gently smiled at her. "Better, thank you," she managed to say.

"I know that the healer wasn't able to examine ye. If ye'd like her to come back, I'd be happy to call her."

"No," she said quickly. "I thank you, but that will not be necessary." She couldn't let him know of her ribs or bruises. Who knew what Innes would do?

The man looked obviously frustrated. "Claire, I know that Seth and Innes visited you in the prisons."

"They wanted a confession," she said quickly. "And I refused to give it. I've done nothing wrong, and I'd appreciate it if you could give me an escort back to London. I promise that you'll never see me again."

He regarded her closely, and she could tell he didn't believe her. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said finally. "I want ye to know that you can trust me. Whatever crimes that ye've committed, ye can tell me. I'm sure ye've already been punished enough."

"Then let me go."

Alec shook his head. "I can't do that, my sweet. I know that there is no way Seth and Innes visited ye in prison just to talk. If ye don't trust me enough to tell me the truth, then I cannot trust ye enough to let ye go."

Alarmed, she gasped. "So you mean to keep me trapped in this room? Trading one prison for another?"

"Nay. If ye won't admit to any pain, then in a few days ye'll be moved to the servants' quarters. Ye'll have a job here, and ye'll be treated well, but ye'll naught be free to leave until ye can be honest with me. Starting with yer name."

Cora narrowed her eyes. The man was too bloody smart for his own good. "I told you my name."

"And if ye think that I believe it, ye'll have quite a bit to learn about me. Eat yer dinner. If yer well enough, I'll order a bath for ye."

The very thought of a bath made her moan. Soap and warm water? Occasionally Innes gave her a bowl and a sponge and ordered her to bathe. At first she'd resisted, thinking that it was the only thing that kept her virtue intact, but when he threatened to do it himself, she hastily cleaned herself. It turned out that he just wanted to see what his future bride would look like clean.

"I would appreciate that. Thank you," she said stiffly. Part of her wondered if Alec was trying to lure her with comforts in order to get the truth from her, but the other part simply didn't care.

“Verra well. We will speak again...Claire.” It was a dark promise, but it sent a thrill up her spine. She could see the hunger in his eyes, but it was different than the way Innes looked at her. It wasn’t as threatening.

And she wasn’t disappointed to see it.

So Alec Sinclair wanted her? Cora wasn’t above using that to her advantage if it meant finally getting out of Scotland.

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*T*rue to Alec's word, after a few days had passed and Cora could walk around without wincing, Alec ordered the guards to move her to the servants' quarters. Her new room was much smaller than the guest chambers he'd had her staying in. It consisted only of a small bed, a table, and two chairs, but it didn't bother her any. She would have been happy sharing a stall with a horse so long as it meant that she was no longer in the prison or guest chambers.

Despite telling Alec that she was fine, Cora was anything but. A few hours after breaking the morning fast, her entire body screamed for rest. After being trapped for six months, her body wasn't used to moving at a fast pace, and it protested, but Cora wasn't about to admit that anything was wrong. Although it was vastly better than the prison, her new position in the castle wasn't all roses.

Despite her humble beginnings, Cora had never worked a day in her life. The Thistles were wealthy enough to employ a few servants, and Cora didn't even begin to know how to cook, and the servants of the MacKay keep knew it. They scowled as they watched her attempt to peel potatoes and muttered behind her back.

"Lassie!" Louise, one of the cooks, yelled. "Yer butchering the potato. There'll be nothing left to eat by the time yer finished with them. What are ye doing here anyway?"

Cora sighed and put the knife down. Louise wasn't wrong. She was chopping off just as much potato as she was peeling. "Just following Mr. Sinclair's orders."

"Mr. Sinclair," Lousie cackled. Her whole portly body shook as the woman bent over, clearly tickled pink by Cora's statement. "Didya hear that, lassie? Ms.Claire is so verra polite."

Mary, the young woman who was stirring the pot of boiling water, smirked. "Shouldn't we be calling him Laird Sinclair? Or is it still Laird MacKay?"

"We'll be calling him nothing of the sort," Louise snapped. "He's an imposter and the sooner he goes on about his business, the better."

Cora narrowed her eyes. "Seth MacKay was an evil bastard, and I would think that you would be pleased to be rid of him."

"Aye, that he was. A disgusting pig of a man, but that doonae mean that we need any help from the Sinclairs. Uppity bunch. Man thinks he's a gift from God. That's no better than Seth, if ye ask me," Louise snorted.

"No one was asking ye, Louise," Mary said calmly. "And I think the new laird might actually be able to help us. He's quite handsome."

Cora immediately bristled. Mary was a pretty girl. Unlike Cora, she wasn't pale and gaunt. Curves in all the right places. Lucious shine in her hair. Full lips. She was probably just what Alec Sinclair would like in his bed.

Immediately, she banished the thought. Alec made it quite clear the night before that he was dangerous. She shouldn't care who wanted to be in his bed.

"Where's yer loyalty, Mary? Yer just as bad as Claire."

"I'm not a MacKay," Cora said immediately. "And I'm loyal to no one here. I'm simply happy to no longer be in the dungeon anymore."

"Of course yer not a MacKay. Our Laird MacKay, Duncan, God rest his soul, would never have messed around with an English woman. What I doonae understand is what ye were doing in the prisons to begin with," Louise said as she put her hands on her hips. When Cora didn't answer right away, Louise tossed her cleaning rag over her shoulder and marched toward Cora. Picking up the knife, she brandished it threateningly. "Answer the question, lassie."

Cora stood up calmly. Louise wouldn't kill her. She wouldn't dare. "You didn't ask a question," she pointed out. "But I'm sure the rumors have reached you. I was incarcerated for stealing, but I maintain my

innocence. The new laird will not release me until he's sure."

"Maybe, but I doonae know what a dainty English thing like yerself is doing in the Highlands unless ye were up to no good," Louise retorted as she put the knife down. "Ye can't stay in the kitchen. Ye have no idea what yer doing. I suggest that ye go clean out the chamber pots," she said with a wicked smile. "Ye can return at dinnertime and help serve the men. Mebbe there'll be something left for ye to eat when yer done."

"How kind of you," Cora said bitterly. It was clear to her that Louise was going to punish her for a number of crimes, the first being English. It didn't even begin to touch on the cruelty of Seth and Innes, so she simply nodded her head and went to complete her duties.

At her slow pace, it took her until dinner to complete the job. Finally, aching and weary, she joined Mary in the kitchen. Thankfully, Louise was nowhere to be found.

"There ye are," Mary hissed. "Where have ye been?"

"I have been chained up for six months. I do not move as quickly as I used to," Cora said shortly. "But I am here now. What do you require of me?"

Mary's eyes immediately widened. "Six months?" she whispered. "What did ye do?"

"I have already answered that question. Nothing. I really prefer not to discuss it."

She could see the sympathy in Mary's eyes, and she hated it. She didn't want the girl's sympathy. She just wanted to finish her duties so she could eat and go to bed.

"I've already brought the food out for the laird and his men. Ye can help me with the rest, and then ye just need to make sure that everyone's cup of ale stays full," Mary instructed. She grabbed a few plates and headed out.

Cora carefully balanced a plate on her forearm and grasped two other plates before following the girl out. She didn't know what to expect from the main hall, but when she walked in on the dozens of Scottish

men, she felt her blood run cold.

Freezing under their curious gazes, she thought about fleeing. How far could she get before they caught her? Could she get to a horse? Did she really think that she could outride a highlander? That she could navigate the treacherous terrain?

Her eyes landed on Alec. He smiled gently at her, and she found the strength to start breathing again. Despite his threats the other night, she discovered that he was her anchor when her fear threatened to drown her. Focusing on one foot in front of the other, she finished serving the food. Hurrying back to the kitchens, she pressed her back against the wall and tried to slow her rapid heartbeat.

“What is wrong with ye?” Mary hissed when she came back. “Ye look positively mad out there!”

“It’s nothing,” Cora said as she swallowed hard. “Just getting used to everything. What did you say I was to do next?”

Mary muttered an oath under her breath and shoved a pitcher of ale in her hand. “Ye cannae make us look bad in front of the new laird.”

Struggling to get her fear under control, Cora bravely made her way back to the main hall. She tried not to let the open lustful stares bother her, and she did her best not to talk. She knew what kind of trouble she’d be inviting if she let them know she was English.

Silently refilling cups, she did her best to keep her distance. A few men tried to grab her, but she danced out of reach and kept moving. Once she got to the end of the table, she hurried back to find solace in the kitchen.

Just as she reached the last man, she turned to the kitchens but a scuffle caught her attention. Turning her head, she saw that two men had imprisoned a struggling Mary between them as they tried to kiss her.

“Stop!” she cried out.

Rage swept through her, and before she knew what she was doing, she climbed up on the table and raced to the servant’s side. Smacking the first guy upside the head with the pitcher, she dropped it and reached

down to grab a knife from the table. “Unhand her immediately or discover how well you can train tomorrow after I’ve shoved a blade in your arm,” she threatened.

Immediately, the hall fell silent. The first man rubbed his head and glared at her. “Who the hell are ye?” he growled. “Mind yer own business, woman!”

He grabbed Mary again, and she whimpered. Cora didn’t hesitate. Gripping the hilt of the blade, she drove it into the man’s shoulder. He yelled in anger and swung around with his fist, hitting her hard in the stomach. Grunting in pain, she doubled over and tried to protect herself against the next blow.

It never came.

“Touch her again, and it will be the last thing ye ever do,” Alec said coldly. He and three men stormed the table. “And ye’ll unhand the servant as well.”

“We were just having a spot of fun,” the other man complained. “We weren’t going to hurt her. We just wanted a kiss.”

Alec ignored him. “What’s yer name?” he asked Mary quietly.

“Mary,” she answered in a trembling voice.

“It would seem that Mary did not want to gift ye with a kiss. Let me make one thing verra clear. I doonae know how yer previous laird ran things, but I’ll not have the women mistreated. Ye may have yer fun, but only if the women are willing. That goes for everyone. Do ye understand me?”

There was nothing but silence in answer, and Alec scowled. “Do ye understand me?” he shouted louder. His voice echoed off the walls, and there was a soft grumbling of agreement. “Good. Mary, I doonae think we have need of ye until after dinner. Go enjoy yer own food.”

The servant scampered off, and Alec reached up to Cora. With trepidation, she took his hand and allowed him to help her off the table. She could feel rage emanating off the two men around her, but they didn’t touch her.

“Are ye okay?” Alec whispered in her ear. She was too afraid to answer without her voice shaking, so she just nodded.

“Jamie, will ye escort Claire to her room,” he instructed. Letting her go, he nodded to his friend. Jamie went to grab her, and she couldn’t help but flinch. He stopped suddenly but rather than questioning it, he just stepped aside and let her walk in front of her.

As she made her way to her room, she couldn’t help but worry about what tomorrow would bring. She’d just publicly humiliated two MacKay men. No doubt they and all of their friends would be seeking vengeance on her.

So much for keeping her head down.

“I know what yer thinking,” Jamie said. “And ye don’t have to worry about those two men. We’ll protect ye.”

“Why?” she asked suddenly as she whirled around. “I’m just a servant. I’ve been accused of stealing, and I’m English. Just why would you protect me?”

He flashed her a charming smile. “Alec is a good man. He protected ye back there, and we’ll protect ye now.”

“He thinks I’m lying to him.”

“Aye, he does. And if ye do him wrong, then ye have something to worry about. Are ye planning on doing him wrong, Miss Claire?”

She opened her mouth to deny it. Of course she didn’t want to hurt Alec. In the short time that she’d known him, he’d done nothing but be kind to her, but his very position as a laird meant that her lying to him was a great disservice. If he discovered the truth of her origins, he would no doubt be hurt by her.

The lies were already piling up. “Thank you, Jamie, for your escort. I bid you goodnight,” she said softly as she slipped into her chambers and quietly closed the door.



Alec showed up less than an hour later. Cora opened the door and felt

her heart skip a beat when she gazed up at him. She tried to tell herself it was glee from seeing the plate of food in his hand, but she was too tired to believe her own lies.

“I wanted to check up on ye,” he said as he cleared his throat. “And feed ye. It was not my intention to banish ye without food.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for your assistance earlier and for the dinner.” She took the plate from his hand and went to close the door, but he put his arm out to stop her.

Instead of feeling afraid, she just felt annoyed. Narrowing her eyes, she glared at him, and he chuckled.

“I’ve been waiting to see fire in yer eyes. I want to talk with ye while ye eat.”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked, but she stepped back and let him in. With his large frame, he took up much of the space in her small room, and he looked around awkwardly. She was suddenly struck with the memory of her father looking uncomfortable in the carriage.

Before Seth murdered him.

“I realize that I may have scared ye last night when we spoke. ’Twas not my intention. I am feeling verra protective of this clan, but I doonae think ye pose a threat. If ye’d just tell me the truth, ye would be able to go free.”

Cora picked at the biscuit and avoided his gaze. “I already told you the truth. I am not a criminal.”

“Yes, and I believe that’s the only honest thing ye’ve told me. What is yer name?”

“Claire.”

“How did ye come to be in Scotland?”

“I got lost.” She looked up to meet his gaze. “Any other questions?”

Alec smirked and sat on the bed next to her. She immediately stiffened, but it had nothing to do with fear. His sudden close presence did something to her body that she’d never experienced before. Cora

suddenly found it hard to breathe, and her fingers trembled with desire.

Desire. Who would have thought it was possible?

He reached out and brushed his fingers along her cheek. “I hate that ye lie to me, but there is something about ye. I have half a mind to kiss ye until ye tell me the truth.”

God, yes. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted to feel his arms around her. “What about your rule that your men cannot kiss a woman without her consent? Does that not extend to you?”

“Would ye deny me?” His voice had dropped to a whisper and wrapped around her seductively. She shivered it, and he knew it. A slow smile spread across his face, and he leaned in closer.

“I think that if you want someone to warm your bed tonight, Sinclair, you’d best look to Mary. She’s quite charmed by you. I find that I am not.”

Alec shook his head. “Another lie. How many will ye tell me, Claire? How will ye keep them straight?”

She held her breath, partly hoping that he’d steal the kiss anyway. Instead, he stood and shook his head. “I cannae imagine that punch felt good. Feel free to take tomorrow off.”

“I’ve had worse,” she said without thinking. Realizing her error, she waited for Alec to ask. He froze, his back to her, but he didn’t turn around. “I’ll be at work tomorrow.”

“Verra well. Sweet dreams, Claire.”

As he left her chambers, she exhaled loudly. Maybe, for tonight, she really would have sweet dreams.

It would be a nice holiday from her normal nightmares.



The woman vexed him. He’d done nothing to hurt her, and yet she still would not tell him the truth. The more she lied to him, the more

he feared that she could prove dangerous.

That didn't stop him from wanting her. His erection was painful as he made his way back to his chambers. If he knew what was good for him, he'd take advantage of Claire's advice and seek out Mary. The girl was a beauty, but he knew that even if a night with her satisfied him physically, it would do nothing to assuage his desire for Claire.

Or whatever her name was.

Alec was still staying in one of the guest chambers. Until everything was removed and either torched or given away, he didn't even want to touch the previous laird's chamber. He shuddered to think of what Seth had done there.

When he reached his room, he had a guest waiting for him. "Kane," he grunted. "I'm tired. What do ye want?"

"How dare you take that chit's side tonight? She harmed a warrior. She should be punished," he declared with anger raging in his eyes.

Alec stopped and stared at him coldly. "She protected a woman against two assailants and was punched in the stomach for her efforts."

"They were just having some fun. 'Tis how we unwind!"

"Not under my watch." Alec's voice was low and even. "Find another way to unwind. Yer warriors should be better than a bunch of lowlifes who have to harass a servant for a good time."

"How can ye expect to gain their respect if ye treat them to public humiliation?" Kane hissed.

"I doonae care if I have their respect. They should care if they have mine. I stand by my decision, and I will continue to do so. Ye are welcome to tell them that. Better yet, I'll do it tomorrow on the field. Anyone who doesn't like the way I handled things is welcome to challenge me," Alec said evenly. "That includes you, Kane. Now, move. I no longer want to discuss this."

"I'll see ye tomorrow on the field, Laird Sinclair," Kane said mockingly. "Ye best get yer rest."

The man disappeared into the shadows, and Alec shook his head. It was true that his actions tonight would make things harder for him, but he didn't want any man who held Seth's values. And if this helped to eliminate them, then so be it.

He men surrounded him, and most were yelling against him.

Briefly, he looked up to see a figure standing at the window, watching the scene unfold below. The English lass really was a beauty, and if he wasn't careful, she'd get him hurt.

Or killed.

Kane's sword came down hard, and Alec just barely ducked it. He couldn't help but grin at the men. "Well done. I have to admit, I didn't expect ye to give me such a good fight. Yer skills are impressive."

The other man grunted, and Alec knew that his energy was waning. They both knew the fight wouldn't last much longer, but to Kane's credit, he didn't look like he was going to give up.

Alec liked that about the man.

"Breathing hard, Kane. Do ye need a break?" he joked as he brought his sword up. The metal clanked, and Alec grunted under Kane's strength.

"Yer always running yer mouth. Laird," Kane said snidely. "Maybe for once, ye'd like to say something worthwhile."

"As a matter of fact, I would." Alec ended the fight quickly as he feinted a parry before tripping Kane and bringing the sword to the man's neck. "I have every right to execute ye right here and now." Gently pressing the tip of the blade against Kane's skin, he thought of his options. To show his strength and create a healthy dose of fear in his clan, he ought to kill Kane. It would be the quickest way to squelch any more thoughts of rebellion against him.

The crowd grew quiet, and Alec sighed. Thrusting his sword into the

ground, he reached down and offered the man his hand. "But I'll not because ye have a right to yer opinion. I am not Seth MacKay, and I will not rule like him. I will not use fear to gain yer respect, but I will also not let ye do the same. What I did last night, I did because I am here to protect yer clan. Everyone in yer clan. From the warriors to the servants. I'll not waiver on that, and if ye cannae accept that, then ye are welcome to leave. With yer head intact."

Kane narrowed his eyes. Rather than taking Alec's peace offering, he struggled to his feet on his own. "We have a right to be respected," Kane growled.

"Then do something worth respecting. Show is over. Back to practice," Alec barked. With a grumble, the men broke back into their teams. Unable to help himself, he glanced back up. Claire was still watching him, but from this distance, he couldn't see her face. Was she glad that Kane hadn't delivered a fatal blow?

Was she disappointed?

She disappeared from view, and he turned his attention back to the practice field. They fought more aggressively, as if they'd found a new enemy to fight against.

Him.

Alec knew the job was dangerous, but for the first time, he wondered just how far the MacKay clan would go to remove him from power.

"Watch it!"

Alec whirled around just in time to see a man fall. His partner stumbled, and his sword sank into the fallen man's body. Alec quickly rushed over and grimaced at the sight.

"Get him inside," he growled. "Send for the healer." The wound was in the shoulder, but if they didn't act quickly, an infection could set in and kill the MacKay man. "What's yer name?"

"Reid," the man said through clenched teeth. "And I'm fine. 'Tis naught but a flesh wound."

"Aye, but 'tis what could come next that bothers me." He ducked

under the man's good arm and supported him as they made their way into the castle. To his surprise, the woman waiting by the bed wasn't the healer.

It was Cora.

"Where's the woman that I asked for?" Alec said tersely.

"Your healer is currently at one of the outlying villages," she said briskly. "I have some experience with wounds. Place a pillow under his side to prop the wound up, please."

"I'll not have some Sassenach touching me!" Reid bellowed.

Alec was about to say something about the man's rudeness, but Cora didn't even miss a beat. "Clearly your wound isn't all that painful. If you don't watch your mouth, I can change that."

Reid opened his mouth again, but Cora simply pressed a cloth to the wound, and the man grunted in pain. Nodding his head, Alec dismissed the other men. "How do ye have experience with wounds?" he asked quietly.

Cora smirked. "If you'll excuse me, Laird, I should really focus on the gentleman bleeding all over the bed. If you want to stay to help out, you're welcome to put some pressure on the wound while I get some fresh water."

She tried to walk past him, and he reached out and grabbed her arm. "This is one of the men who would have seen you punished for yer actions last night," he said in a low voice. "Ye wouldn't be wanting to take yer revenge, would ye, lass?"

"You are the one letting him bleed to death by detaining me, my Laird," she said with a sweet smile.

Grimacing, he let her go and went to tend Reid's wound. The bigger man grunted in pain and eyeballed him. "Ye could just let me die. One less man to worry about."

"What fun would that be?"

The door opened, but rather than the lying English woman, it was Shane. "Sorry to interrupt, Laird. Innes Campbell is riding in."

Didn't the snake just leave his land? "Ride out and meet him. See what he wants. If he has more than half a dozen men with him, turn him away."

"Aye." Shane hesitated and nodded his head. "Reid."

Reid nodded, and Alec watched the exchange with interest. There was some respect developing between his warriors and the MacKay men. That was good. As Shane opened the door, the auburn-haired beauty slipped back in with fresh cloths and steaming water. She pushed Alec's hand lightly out of the way. "Let's see what we have," she said briskly.

Reid tried to pull away. "I said that I don't want no—"

"Mr. Reid, you are most welcome to wait for the healer to return," Cora said, cutting him off. "Chances are good that you'll still be alive then, but if you wait to clean out the wound, an intense fever could set in by tomorrow. Have you ever seen someone get a fever after a wound, Mr. Reid?"

Wordlessly, the man nodded. Alec could see the fear and wariness in his eyes. Cora put a hand on her hip. "I suggest you put your stubbornness and hatred of the English aside and let me take care of you."

Leaning back against the wall, Alec folded his arms and watched Cora win him over. It was impressive, and it did amuse him, but it also solidified something for him.

Claire, or whatever she wants to call herself, is a dangerous woman.

Finally, Reid was cleaned, bandaged, and resting. Alec held the door open and motioned for her to join him outside. "Ye did good work in there," he said softly. "I've seen healers who couldn't stitch a man up the way that ye did."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Nay," he said softly. "'Tis naught but an observation. I just wanted ye to know that I was paying attention. How are ye feeling today?"

She lifted her chin and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

“Ye spent months in prison, and ye were punched in the stomach yesterday. I know ye are hurting. I’m just asking ye how the pain feels today?” He was close enough to lean down and kiss her, but once again, he held himself back. The desperate urge was there to taste her, touch her smooth skin, listen to the hitch in her breath.

There was a flicker of surprise in her eyes. “You don’t need to worry about me, Laird Sinclair. One little blow is not enough to bring me down.”

Alec shook his head as he watched her walk away. For an English woman, she certainly did have guts.



When Cora made her way to her chambers, she was surprised to find there was a bath waiting for her. Mary finished pouring it and smiled shyly. “Laird Sinclair thought ye might want a chance to wash up before dinner.”

“It’s not necessary, but I wouldn’t want the bath to go to waste. Thank you, Mary.”

“Tis the least that I could do after the way that ye stood up for me last night. No one has ever done that for me before.” The servant walked forward and grabbed her hand. “I don’t know what yer story is, but I doonae care.”

Was Mary offering to be her friend? Cora was touched, but the circumstances surrounding the situation were vile. “It was nothing,” she said dismissively. “Thank you for the bath. I will be ready to help you with the evening meal.”

“It wasn’t nothing,” Mary insisted. “No one has ever stood up for me like that. I hadn’t expected it from a Sassenach.”

Cora raised an eyebrow. A compliment and an insult all rolled into one. “Thanks,” she said dryly.

“I shouldn’t call ye that. I’m sorry. Old habits are hard to break,” Mary said with a shrug. “Enjoy yer bath.”

Had she just made a friend? Cora couldn't help but smile as Mary left. If that were true, it would be the first real friend Cora had made in years. Even in London, she was scorned, although for an entirely different reason.

After her bath, she was in good spirits. She met Mary and Louise to help out with the evening meal. Even Louise was treating her with more respect. Cora couldn't believe her luck. Maybe things were finally turning around for her.

"Well, get on with it," Louise grumbled. "Ye just standing there with that stupid smile on yer face."

Chuckling, Cora bumped the door with her hip and took the first tray of drinks out. The face that grinned back at her made her blood run cold.

Innes Campbell. What was he doing here?

Swallowing hard, she quickly averted her eyes and moved to take Mary's side of the great hall. The other servant looked at her questioningly but quickly took over her tables. When she got back to the kitchen, her heart was pounding.

"Claire?" Mary hissed. "Are ye okay? What's happening?"

"Innes Campbell. What's he doing here?" Cora whispered.

"I doona know, but we were told that he was staying the night. Yer shaking. What is wrong?"

Cora shook her head. "I'm fine, but I don't like that man. Do you mind if we switch sides? I'd like to avoid him if I could."

"Of course," Mary said with a concerned look. "But ye have to serve the laird. Ye should have done it first before providing food to anyone else."

It was all Cora could do not to roll her eyes. The last thing she was concerned about was protocol, but she nodded and grabbed the next tray of drinks. Aware that Innes's eyes watched her every step, she made her way to the head of the hall where Alec and his men were waiting.

It was obvious the Sinclair warriors were not happy. “Ye serve the laird first. Always,” Stephen muttered with narrowed eyes. “Ye should be relieved of yer duties immediately.”

Alec didn’t seem all that angry. Instead, he watched her with inquisitive eyes. “Ye normally work the other side. What made ye change yer mind?”

Cora smiled sweetly at him. “I just find you so charming. And I apologize for not serving you first. You and your handsome men just make me so nervous.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know why I ever expect ye to tell me the truth.”

Putting a hand over her chest, she feigned outrage as she kept moving past him to finish serving the drinks. The new laird could think whatever he wanted to think so long as he didn’t try to send her back over to Innes. It surprised her that Innes wasn’t cozying up to Alec, but she got the feeling the two men didn’t get along.

If she knew that she could trust him, Alec could be an ally. He’d make sure that her sister was safe, and he’d protect her.

But the clan was important to him. If he got wind that she was Duncan’s daughter, he’d be first in line to kill her.

Taking a deep breath, she found the courage to look Innes’s way. He was laughing with the men at his table and clapping them on the back. He really was a handsome devil. It was too bad that something truly evil resided inside him. She could see it in his eyes every time he’d raised his hand to strike her.

She could see it now when he raised his head and smiled at her. Chills raced down her spine, and she gasped softly. Not looking where she was going, she tripped over someone’s foot. The drinks on her tray spilled all over a table of men and a hush fell over the room.

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered. She knew they recognized her from last night. Raising her chin, she waited for the violent reaction. A large man stood and narrowed his eyes as he studied her.

“No worries, lass. ’Twas an accident. Just fetch us some more,” he growled. A few other men stood, and he turned and glared at them.

“There won’t be a problem here, right?”

Surprised, Cora nodded her head. “I’ll get new drinks right away.” With wide eyes, she scampered from the room. Mary grabbed her arm.

“Ye have no idea how lucky ye just got. That’s Cormac. His sister works here in the castle.”

“He’s protecting me,” Cora said softly.

“Because by protecting me, ye protected all the women that work here,” Mary said with a smile. “Why are ye scared of Campbell?”

The change in subject threw Cora off balance, and she nearly spilled the new tray of drinks. “I’m not scared. I just don’t like the man. That’s not a crime, is it?” she asked hotly before heading back to the dining hall. She felt bad for speaking like that to Mary, but she couldn’t afford for anyone to guess her secret.

Reaching Cormac’s table, she served the men with a small smile. “Thank you for understanding,” she said softly.

Cormac barely acknowledged the statement, but Cora didn’t mind. The man had already protected her.

That made two Scottish men who had protected her in the past week. Maybe she’d need to rethink her position on them.

Smiling to herself, she went to duck back into the kitchen, but before she could get there, someone reached out and grabbed her arm. They dragged her down the poorly lit hallway and around the corner.

“Let go of me!” Cora demanded. She whirled around to face the man and gasped when Innes grinned at her. “Get your hands off me. I am no longer your prisoner.”

“Aye, but yer still my betrothed. I have the King’s seal to prove it, or did ye forget about that?”

“The King approved a marriage between you and Cora Isles. She’s dead, or have you forgotten that?” she hissed.

Innes didn’t look at all stressed. Lazily grinning at her, he reached up to touch her hair. She jerked her head back and struck it against the

stone wall. The pain nearly brought tears to her eyes, but she struggled to control herself. “Maybe Cora survived,” he said softly. “Maybe Seth imprisoned her to keep her from taking over, and maybe I’m just the man to save her.”

“Or maybe you and Seth killed my father and then beat me for six months,” she snapped. “You touch me, and I’ll tell everyone the truth. Alec Sinclair is laird now.”

“Aye, but this clan belongs to me. I helped Seth with his plan because he was going to help me kill my brother, but he’s dead now, so I want this clan. And the MacKays want me. Even they’ll forgive me for marrying an Englishwoman if she’s the daughter of Duncan MacKay. This clan worshipped the man, and there is nothing you can do to stop me because ye know that I’ll kill that lovely sister of yours. She’s set to enter her first season next year, right?”

Cora swallowed hard and closed her eyes. “Just leave me alone. Please.”

Innes gripped her arm and leaned forward. For a hellish moment, she thought he might kiss her. “I can’t, Miss Cora. You belong to me. Just because yer walking around freely does not change that.”

“Well, doesn’t this look cozy,” Alec said coldly.

Innes stepped back and turned his head. “I’ve heard yer decree. Trust me, this one is more than willing, laird.”

“Claire?” Alec asked softly. “I think it would be best if ye served our meals now.”

“Of course. My apologies.” Pulling away from Innes, she hurried past Alec and tried to keep the fear from showing on her face.

She would never be free from her nightmares. Once Innes left, she’d have to make her escape and reach London before he knew she was gone.

It meant more lying to Alec, and for some reason, she hated the very thought of it.

Alec paced in his chambers and tried not to revisit the evening in his mind yet again. Watching Innes touch Cora awoke something primal in him, but it was even worse that she hadn't pushed him away. He'd spent this whole time thinking that she'd been his victim, but what if he was wrong? *What if Claire and Innes are working together?*

It made sense. If they were working together to bring Seth down, it would explain why she was in prison and why she was reluctant to give him any information.

Did that mean he was next on her list? Innes no doubt thought he was next to be the MacKay leader. No one would suspect that the wee English woman would be able to bring him down. No one would suspect her treachery.

How would he get the truth out of her? He wanted to shake her until she said something that was honest, but he had a feeling that wouldn't work. She had to have some weaknesses.

Despite her prickly nature, he recognized the look of lust in her eyes. He couldn't bully the truth out of her, but maybe he could seduce her.

His body responded to the thought, and he set his jaw. He couldn't keep thinking of her as a wronged thief.

She could very well be an assassin.



Alec didn't sleep well that night, and he was up well before the rest of the castle began to wake. Stealing down into the kitchen, he was

surprised to find that he wasn't the only one up before the sun.

"Jamie," he grunted. "Why aren't ye sleeping?"

"I find this place unsettling," Jamie muttered.

Alec eyed his old friend. "Ye want to go back to Sinclair land." It wasn't a question. He knew things weren't easy for them here. It wasn't easy for him either.

"Mebbe eventually," Jamie said with a shrug. "I don't mean it's unsettling because it's filled with MacKay men. There is something unnatural about these stones."

Alec snorted. "Ye and yer superstitious nonsense."

"Ye don't believe in ghosts?"

"Tis an old castle, Jamie. I have no doubt that there are plenty of spirits still hanging around. The same can be said about the Sinclair lands as well."

Jamie shook his head. "There's just something about this place. I think it's Seth. His evil nature still haunts the halls."

"Seth was only laird for six months. Before that, it was Duncan, and while we didn't get along, he was a good man and a good laird. There's a good feeling in this place. I have a good feeling about it. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I wouldn't ask ye and Shane and Stephen to stick around if I didn't. I hope ye know that."

Jamie grinned. "We know that. I'll get used to the place. Don't worry about me. Biscuit?"

Alec eyed the biscuit suspiciously. "Who did ye seduce to get biscuits this early?"

"Mary might have her eyes on ye, but she'll settle for me," he said with a wink. "I'll share if yer nice."

Rolling his eyes, Alec snatched the biscuit out of Jamie's hand and took a bite out of it. "What do ye think of Claire?"

"So ye aren't calling her the thief anymore?"

“I saw her talking with Innes Campbell last night. They looked intimate.”

Jamie raised his eyebrows and waited a beat. “Were ye going to ask a question?”

“What am I supposed to think? I find her in the prisons. No one in the clan can vouch for her. She lies about her name. She’s English, and last night she was pressed against Innes and the wall. She’s a spy for him.”

“No.” Jamie shook his head. “Innes is a scoundrel, and he’s seduced his fair share of women, but I doonae get a bad feeling from Claire. I doonae think she’s done anything wrong.”

Normally, Alec trusted Jamie’s instincts. The man had a strange power to read other people, but this time, there were just too many things that didn’t add up. “Why doesn’t she tell me the truth? Why doesn’t she at least lie and try to leave?”

“Maybe something is keeping her here,” Jamie suggested. “Maybe she really is a thief, and she hasn’t gotten her hands on what she wants.”

“Ye just said that ye didn’t think she’d done anything wrong.”

“Maybe she took something that belongs to her. It should not surprise ye that Seth MacKay would take anything he wanted, whether it belonged to him or not. The point is that it does not matter. She is just a lass. She can do no real harm. You can continue to stand here and be consumed by her, or ye can get a few practice rounds in before the rest of the men join us.”

Was Jamie right? Was his obsession for nothing? Whether she was innocent or not, how much damage could she inflict? Even if she were a spy for Innes, he could easily thwart her by ensuring that no real information reaches her ears.

Determined not to let the beautiful enigma consume him further, he followed his man outside the castle. Part of the reason that Alec wanted to stay was that the MacKay lands were breathtaking. He’d always be partial to the lands he’d grown up in, but the MacKay fields had a breathtaking view of the cliffs and the valley below. It made

half the castle impregnable, and supposedly there were secret tunnels beneath the lands so that the MacKay people could never be trapped. So long as the laird could protect the other side, the MacKays would never surrender. Every clan on this side of the valley wanted these lands.

And now they were his, but only if he could keep them. He wasn't about to let the liar and Innes Campbell take them from him.



“Mary!” Louise bellowed. “Why were there a dozen biscuits left out on the counter?”

Mary grinned and winked at Cora. “Why are ye asking me? Earlier ye were calling me a lazy cow for sleeping in a few minutes.”

The plump cook narrowed her eyes and studied the pretty servant. “I know yer little tricks. Ye think the fastest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

“Among other things,” Mary said with a sly smile.

Cora couldn’t help but feel her stomach tighten. Was she talking about Alec? Had Mary found a way to the man after all?

What did she care? Alec didn’t belong to her. He could bed whomever he wanted. It didn’t bother her any.

Yet another lie. Jealousy burned through her even though she didn’t understand it. How could she care about a man that she didn’t altogether trust and who did not trust her?

“Ye don’t look like ye slept at all,” Louise said as she studied Cora. “What’s wrong, love? Other than being English, of course.”

Cora chuckled. “I assure you, being English does not keep me up. I’m still trying to adjust to my new life. Do you happen to know if Mr.Campbell is still here?”

“Mr. Campbell?” Mary asked sharply. “Ye mean Innes? What’s yer story with him? Ye looked terrified of him last evening.”

“No,” Cora denied quickly. She didn’t want it getting back to Innes that the servants thought she was terrified of him. “He just gives me a bad feeling.”

“He’s not a good man,” Mary said darkly. “Ye would do well to stay away from him. I think he’s still here.”

Trying to sound casual, she cleared her throat. “Is he planning on staying long?”

Louisa frowned. “I overheard his men saying that they wanted to keep an eye on things. Check up on the new laird. They’ll probably be here for a few more days. Why?”

“Just wondering.” Cora tried not to smile. If Innes was distracted here, then it was possible that she could slip away and get a head start to London. The man was a heavy drinker. After dinner this evening, she’d wait until he was good and drunk and then make her move. That would give her a solid eight hours start ahead of him, and if she was lucky, even longer. She might even get to London before Innes even realized she was gone. She’d get Lana and hide her away. Maybe then, everything would finally be in order.

She could go back to living her life and could forget about this whole nightmare. When Louisa and Mary started bickering again, Cora swiped a few biscuits and tried to hide her guilt. The two women were treating her like a friend, and she felt like she was betraying them.

As the day continued, she couldn’t help but feel more and more nervous. She couldn’t even meet Alec’s stare during the morning meal, and she could feel Innes’s eyes on her. The worst part was that she knew Alec was suspicious.

That afternoon, as she cleaned the chambers, she collected a few things here and there. Some clothes to ride in. She’d be less conspicuous as a man. A blanket and a canteen. She had no idea how long it would take her to get to England. She wasn’t even sure she knew the right direction, but so long as she went south, she figured she’d find her way eventually.

Forcing a cheery disposition for dinner, she tried to pretend that nothing was wrong. Finally, as she cleaned up after the meal, she gave

Mary a curt smile. "Well, I suppose I'll retire for the evening. Thank you ladies for everything."

"Do ye think we're daft?" Louisa growled. "Ye've been nipping food all day, and I can tell from yer flat belly that ye ain't eating it. What are ye doing?"

Cora twisted her fingers around and felt a flush creep up her neck. She really was a terrible liar. "I have to go," she whispered finally as Louisa and Mary stared at her. "I can't tell you why."

"Does it have something to do with Innes Campbell and why ye were in that prison?" Mary whispered. Cora nodded, and Mary and Louisa exchanged a look. She could tell the women knew something.

"What?" she asked urgently. "What is it?"

"I thought there might be something wrong, so I followed Innes today. He told his men that ye were too scared to tell the truth."

Cora swallowed hard. "I have a younger sister in London," she said shakily. "Innes is threatening her harm. I have to get to her as soon as possible to protect her. I'm leaving tonight."

"A wee lass like ye traveling by yerself? Ye'll never make it," Louisa said as she shook her head.

"Then I'll die, and hopefully my sister will be safe. You can't tell anyone. Please."

"I can't let ye go out there and die. Tell Laird Sinclair. I know we all act like we hate him around here, but I think he'll be good. I think he'll protect ye," Mary said as she grabbed her arm. "Ye will not survive the trip down the mountainous terrain."

"I can't tell Alec and neither can you. Promise me, Mary and Louise. Swear to me that you'll keep my secret. He could lose this clan. You will be at the mercy of Innes Campbell."

"What the devil are ye talking about?" Louise said loudly. She and Mary both stared at her, and she ducked her head. "What do ye know?"

"I can't tell you, but I have to believe that between Alec and Innes,

you'd choose Alec. Right?" The two women nodded. "Then you have to let me go. If I...when I make it safe, I'll send word back so that you know. I took some men's clothes so I can disguise myself, and I've also taken a few supplies. I'll send those back as well. I'm not a thief."

Louisa looked around frantically before gathering a few things and bundling them up in a cloth. "When ye get to the stable, ye tell Niall that I sent ye, and ye tell him that ye want Tally. He's an older horse and won't draw so much attention to ye, but he's good and strong. Ye stay off the main paths as much as possible. Did ye get yer hands on a weapon?"

Cora's eyes widened. A weapon? She hadn't even thought about that. Mary's eyes lit up. "Hold on. I've got ye covered."

As she scampered away, Cora threw her arms around Louisa. "How can I ever thank you for this?"

"I don't want ye thanks," Louisa grunted. "I want ye to stay safe."

"I'll be safe," Cora promised her. "I'm a hard woman to kill."

"Ye don't look it," the cook said with a rueful shake of her head.

Mary returned and handed her a sword that was covered in scratches and dings. Cora held it awkwardly and shook her head. "Mary, I can't take this. I can't even wield it."

"I won't let ye leave unless ye take it," the young servant protested. "Just carrying it will help deter trouble. Please. It belonged to my brother."

"Belonged?" Cora said with a frown.

Sadness passed over her friend's face. "When Laird Seth MacKay took over, my brother Dennis didn't agree with him. He ended up leaving. He said he'd come back for me, but I haven't heard from him in months."

Cora could tell that Mary didn't really want to part with it. Reaching over, she hugged her friend. "I'll send it back when I get to London. I promise."

There was a disruptive sound from the hall followed by male laughter.

Cora's eyes widened in panic, and Louisa grabbed her and dragged her from the kitchen. "Ye have to go change and leave the castle through the servants' tunnels. That way no one will see ye. Go. Go!"

She cast one last look at the two women who were helping her before scurrying away. Her heart pounded in her chest as she quickly got rid of her dress and changed into the trousers that were three sizes too big and the large shirt. Belting the clothes, she slipped the bag over her head and gripped the sword. Taking a deep breath, she glanced out the room. When the coast was clear, she made a mad dash to the serving tunnels and finally out to the stables.

Niall, the stable hand, frowned at her. "If yer planning on passing yerself off as a man, yer gonna have to do something with yer hair. Come here, lass."

He led Cora to the back of the stables where he handed her a cap. Cora did the best she could to pull her hair up and stash it under the cap. Glancing up at Niall, she saw his eyes go wide and immediately drop to the floor. Whirling around, she realized that they were no longer alone.

Alec Sinclair crossed his arms and frowned at her. "Only an idiot would take ye as a boy. Ye can't hide the curves of yer body under those clothes."

Cora's hand dropped to the hilt of the sword, and Alec's eyes followed the movement. "Are ye that daft, Claire?"

No. She wasn't. Dropping her hands to her side, she jutted her chin out defiantly. Other than nipping a few things, she hadn't done anything wrong yet. "I'm just taking a ride. It's easier for me to ride at night and in disguise."

"Is that why ye've been acting nervously all day? And stealing food? For a night ride?"

"Midnight snack," she said shortly. "I'll return to my chambers."

She tried to brush past Alec, but he reached out and grabbed her arm. "Why don't I escort ye back to yer chambers, Miss Claire. That way ye won't have to worry about yer safety."

“Am I safe from you?” she said darkly. Niall gasped, but Alec’s stare never wavered.

“If ye thought that were true, ye wouldn’t be running, would ye? Not that it matters what ye think. Yer not leaving.”

The man grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly from the stables. He walked so quickly back to the castle that she had to stumble to keep up. The sword smacked against her leg awkwardly, and she knew that she’d have several bruises in the morning. “Laird Sinclair,” she cried out. “Please stop. Please. Please!”

She yelled and jerked her arm away. He turned around and there was fire in his eyes. “What were you thinking, lass? Ye were going to escape in the middle of the night by yerself? Did ye think that ye’d make it all the way to England on yer own? Ye wouldn’t even make it out of Scotland alive. If the terrain didn’t kill ye, someone would!”

“You don’t know what you’re doing by keeping me here,” she said as she rubbed her arm. She was humiliated to feel the tears springing to her eyes. “You have to let me go.”

“I doonae understand ye,” he growled in frustration. “I’ve offered ye my protection, but ye won’t tell me anything honest. Now I find ye trying to escape the castle within a day of cozying up to Innes Campbell.”

Cora gasped and backed up a few steps. “Cozying up to him? Is that what you think that I’m doing?”

“I don’t know what ye’re doing because ye won’t tell me!”

“I can’t! If I thought that you could help me, I would tell you, but I can’t. I know that you’re frustrated, but I’m protecting you.”

“Protecting me?” he gaped at her. “First of all, it takes more than a Sassenach like ye to protect me, and second of all, ye don’t even know me. Why would ye protect me?”

Wiping her eyes, she shook her head. “Niall is going to give me a horse now, so you might as well either let me go or take me back to the dungeon.”

“Damnation, woman. Is that what ye want?”

“I want you to let me go!”

He stopped and stared at her. With a sigh, he grabbed her arm, but this time it was more gentle. He slowed his pace as he led her back through the tunnels, but he didn’t head back to the servant chambers. Instead, he took her back to his own.

“What am I doing here?” she asked nervously.

“I could take ye back to the dungeons, but I have a feeling that won’t get me anywhere. I thought that maybe, if ye felt safe here, ye’d be willing to talk.”

Cora removed the sword and bag and let them drop to the ground. “I already told you that I have nothing to say to you.”

He paced in the room and shook his head angrily. “Get out of those ridiculous clothes,” he growled.

“I’m sorry, do you have a dress for me to change into?” she asked as she put her hands on her hips.

“Everything ye do is ridiculous! Ye drive me to distraction, woman! I free ye from prison, and ye lie to me. I protect ye, and ye risk yer life by trying to escape! I can’t decide if yer mad or just plain daft!”

Cora darted her tongue out in an effort to wet her dry lips. His eyes darkened at the action, and she inhaled sharply. “Alec, I’m not quite sure what you want me to say.”

“I think, right now, I doona want ye to say anything,” he whispered as he closed the distance between them. She pressed her back against the wall, but there was no escape. If Cora was being honest with herself, she would admit that she didn’t want to escape. From the moment that he’d picked her up from the prison and carried her to her chambers, she wanted to feel his arms around her again.

She put her hands on his chest, but he snagged them with one hand and raised them up above her head. His other hand settled on her hip, and her heart pounded in her chest. “What,” her voice came out as a squeak, and she cleared her throat and tried again. “What are you

doing?"

"Something that I've wanted to do for days," he said in a low voice before he bent his head and kissed her. It wasn't her first kiss. There were two occasions where someone had kissed her when she was younger, but they were simply hoping that she'd be like her mother. Instead, she'd slapped them and stepped away before things got too far. Innes had kissed her several times to torment her. She'd quickly grown to hate the contact of a man, but this was different.

Alec's caresses were gentle and heated her blood like nothing else. Rather than push him away, Cora wanted to pull him closer, but her hands were still trapped. Alec pulled back and rested his forehead on hers. "Open yer mouth, lass."

Puzzled, she frowned. "Why?"

He swooped back down again and captured her lips, only this time, his tongue snuck in and stroked hers. Surprised, Cora gasped, but it was followed by a low moan. With just one kiss, he'd awakened feelings inside her that she didn't even know existed.

"Sweetheart," he murmured. "Ye act like this is yer first time kissing a man."

She was about to explain that it sort of was when he kissed her just below her ear. Shocked and aroused, she tugged at her hands. "Please," she whispered. "Please, I want to touch you."

"Yes," he moaned. "Ye can touch me where ye want to." When he released her hands, she wrapped them around his neck, but rather than explore his body like she wanted to, she could just hang on. His fingers skimmed over the fabric of the trousers, and when he touched the apex of her thighs, she trembled and cried out.

"So smooth," Alec muttered, his breath hot in her ear. "Ah, I want to touch ye, Claire."

Claire. The lie washed over her and left her feeling cold and hollow. "Wait," she whispered. "I can't do this."

He froze and pulled his head back to stare at her. "Why? What aren't ye telling me?"

She could see the frustration in his eyes. Unable to help herself, she reached up to touch his cheek. "I want to trust you, Alec. I really do."

Before he could respond, there was a pounding on the door. "Laird? We have a guest."

Alec sighed and shook his head. "I doona care. They can wait."

"I doona thing so. 'Tis King Edward. He'll be here within the hour."

"What?" Alec growled and leapt across the room to open the door. Cora, still shaken by his touch, could only gape at the news.

Dear God, what if the Scottish King was there for Innes? What if he'd come to make sure that she did what she was supposed to do six months ago?

Marry Innes Campbell.

Alec took several deep breaths. There was no way they could be prepared for the King in an hour, but King Edward knew that. He was, no doubt, trying to catch Alec unawares to see how things were really going.

“Get Kane and Jamie to organize a hunt. We won't be able to feed them with the meat we have in the reserves. Make sure Seth's old chambers are clean for the King.” He turned back and stared at Cora. She looked terrified as she pressed herself against the wall. He couldn't very well have her running around the keep with the King here, especially if she really was a problem.

She seemed to sense his hesitation. “I'll stay out of the way,” she said faintly. “You don't have to worry about me.”

“Aye. And if ye so much as look at the King, I'll have ye thrown back in the dungeons,” he threatened. Fear flashed in her eyes, and he felt the sting of guilt, but there was too much riding on this visit for him to risk letting her roam free.

It was for the best. He couldn't let his desire for her get in the way of what he knew. She was hiding something.

Annoyed, he left the room and slammed the door shut behind him. He didn't have time to think of her. So long as she stayed out of the way, he would deal with her later. Barking orders at the MacKay clan, he had them all scurrying to prep for the King's arrival. Most of them were getting ready to go to bed and weren't happy to have to work, but when news of the King's imminent arrival spread, they quickly got to work.

Within the hour, the gates opened and King Edward rode through

with a small group. Alec was relieved to see that he didn't have his normal army with him. Edward dismounted easily, no small feat for a man his age, and walked forward to grasp Alec's hand. "Sinclair," he said with a tight smile. "I see that ye've settled in."

"Yer Majesty," Alec said as he bowed in respect. "'Tis an honor to see ye."

"Don't lie, boy," Edward growled. "Yer panicked that I'm here, but I'm not here to cause ye any alarm. I know how stubborn the MacKays can be, and I'm here to endorse yer reign. Has that Campbell boy been by?"

"Innes Campbell? Several times," Alec said with a frown.

"And ye've welcomed him, no doubt, because that's the kind of man that ye are." Edward grunted and shook his head. "Well, we doona require any dinner. Just a bed to spend the night. 'Tis been a long trip for a man my age."

"Aye, Sire. I've got old Laird MacKay's chambers ready for ye."

Edward raised an eyebrow. "Am I displacing ye?"

"No, Yer Majesty," Alec said with a shake of his head. "His tastes don't match mine, and I haven't had a chance to change things. But 'tis the nicest chamber in the keep, so 'tis only right that ye have it."

"Verra well. How is yer brother? Please tell me that he has his sights on a bonnie lass by now."

Alec laughed. "I'm afraid not. Connor has his hands full with Grace."

"Well, he needs to marry her off and then he needs to find himself a bride. If this works out, he won't be relying on ye to take over the clan if something happens to him. I want him to produce an heir and soon. Ye can tell him I said that."

"He'll be verro happy to hear that," Alec said with a laugh. Connor would cringe at the thought of the King ordering him to marry, and they both knew it. "We'll get ye and yer men settled. Care to train with us tomorrow?"

"I'm too old for that, but I'm sure my men would enjoy that. I'd like to

see the progress that ye've made.”

The warning was clear, and Alec nodded curtly. Edward wasn't just here to visit and provide his assistance. He was here to make sure that Alec had things well in hand.



Although Cora had promised to stay out of the way, she was fascinated by the Scottish King. When she'd turned sixteen, the Thistles enthusiastically prepared her for her first season even though they knew that she was no Lady. Cora had wanted nothing more than to hide from society and lock herself away in her quiet home, but Lana, who would one day be acknowledged as an eligible Lady, had encouraged her with such love and stars in her eyes that Cora couldn't deny her.

It was made clear at that very first ball that no one in the aristocracy would accept her. She'd tried desperately to make the Thistles see the torment that she endured with every outing, but they waved her away and told her that she was letting her fears get the best of her. So, year after year, they presented her to society, and year after year, she was cast out by their poisoned-dripped taunts and scathing glares.

Would the head of the Scottish court be the very same? Rumors were that the King upheld strength and loyalty over lineage and inheritance. What would he make of her?

She gripped the handle on her door and pressed her ear against the wood. Several times today, she'd opened the door and nearly stepped out. In his haste to get things ready, Alec had failed to post a guard at the door to ensure that she would not leave, but her fear of Innes and what King Edward would do if he discovered that she was still alive had her scurrying back inside.

“How would he know?” she whispered to herself. “He'll believe you to be a servant and never look twice at you. What's the harm?”

Gritting her teeth in determination, she swung the door open and stopped. Mary stood on the other side with her hand up, poised to knock on the door. “Claire!” she whispered. “Oh, I'm so sorry! Is he

punishing ye?”

Cora’s eyes widened in fear. “What? He knows?”

Mary swept past her. “I heard he caught ye last night. When I didn’t see a guard at yer door, I feared I’d find ye back in the prisons! Did he beat ye?”

Immediately, Cora realized that the other servant was talking about Alec and not the King. As her thoughts returned to the night before, embarrassment stained her cheeks. Not only did Alec not beat her, but he’d instilled a flame of desire that she’d still been unable to extinguish. “No. He was quite cross with me, but he did not beat me,” she muttered. “I am to stay in my quarters while your King is here.”

“Innes Campbell went home last night. King’s orders. He wished to speak to Alec, so ye do not need to worry about him for now. Oh, Claire, ye can’t stay here. They’ve planned the most wonderful celebration for tonight. The King has ordered musicians and dancers. Do ye know that we haven’t had a grand celebration since Laird Duncan MacKay was alive? Ye can’t miss it!”

“It’s sweet of you to invite me, but I assure you, I’m no stranger to balls.”

Mary wrinkled her nose. “I’ve heard of what you English consider a ball, and believe me, ’tis nothing like what we do. The drink flows freely, and everyone can join in. We serve, but we also dance and laugh. Brawls break out, and the bards tell the most wonderful tales!”

“Brawls break out? Sounds more like a tavern than a ball,” Cora pointed out, but she was intrigued. “I suppose I can try to sneak a look, but I won’t be able to join.”

Mary sighed and shook her head. “Well, it won’t do well to defy the laird, especially with the King here, but ye should try to watch. Ye could do with some fun.”

“Will your clan show some respect for Alec MacKay?”

Her friend hesitated. “’Tis no secret that King Edward is here to check up on things. He’s showing his support for Alec Sinclair, but he’ll listen to my clan. If he fears that the Sinclair cannae earn their loyalty,

he'll appoint another. Kane is our greatest warrior. He deserves to be our laird."

"Perhaps, but we both know that under Seth, he never gained the experience that he needed. I heard Seth and Innes talking many times about the threat that Kane posed. Seth would have killed him months ago had he not feared the uprising it would have caused. He deliberately kept him away from politics so that he could overthrow him. The King will give the clan to Innes Campbell. He's far more experienced and perhaps even more cruel than Seth."

"How do ye know this?" Mary demanded.

"Seth and Innes spoke freely when they visited me in the dungeon. They assumed that I'd never dare to tell their secrets," Cora said bitterly.

"Ye must tell someone what ye know, Claire. 'Tis the only way that ye'll be able to shake loose the demons that haunt ye."

"I can't. Not while Innes still lives and breathes. He knows of my family. He'll kill them without a moment of hesitation. I won't let that happen. If I cannot return to them and protect them, the only thing I can do is keep quiet and hope that it is enough."

"Yer no servant, Claire. I can tell by how smooth yer hands are and inadequate yer cooking skills are. Ye must have a wonderful life in England."

Cora smiled wistfully. "I was well-loved by a family, but any future that I had with another is ruined. No one would believe that I remain pure while locked away for six months. My only reason for returning is to see that Lana's future is secure. She's my sister, and she shines brighter than the sun."

Reaching over, Mary took her hand and squeezed. "Whatever ye need, I'll help ye. But there's nothing ye can do tonight, so steal away so ye can dance with me, and I can see a genuine smile on that face. All right?"

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

The day passed slowly. Cora watched from the window as Alec and his

friends continued to train the MacKay men. Although she knew very little of fighting, she could see the improvement. Today, it looked as though Alec was breaking a sweat. Either his techniques were working, or the clan wanted to impress the older man watching.

From her perch, she watched King Edward. There was no change in his expression, nothing to signify whether he was pleased or disappointed by the new laird's actions. Part of her was thankful to the man for sending Innes Campbell away, but the other greatly feared his power. If he understood the cruelty of the man, why would he order her marriage?

On the other hand, he could have handed the MacKays over to Innes instead of Alec. So what did that say about him?

Suddenly, as though he felt her burning gaze upon them, Alec looked up sharply. Seeing his distraction, Edward did the same. Gasping, Cora stumbled back from the window. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she sat heavily on the bed.

Tonight, during the festivities, she would take another chance at escape. Alec would be too distracted to notice, and she'd finally be able to put all of this mess behind her.



Hours later, when the muted sound of music reached her ears, she quietly opened the door and slipped out. Alec had taken away her disguise, sword, everything she had packed away. If she thought to survive the journey, she'd have to search his chambers first.

The hall was deserted. She rapidly made her way to the stairwell and climbed the stairs to the guest chambers. She couldn't remember which was his, but she remembered that it was on the end. One by one, she cracked the doors open and peered in until she finally found the one that stirred her memories. His searing touch. The kiss that had easily wiped away her resolve. The desperate desire for more.

With a shuddering breath, she pushed the memories aside and gathered the things that had been so thoughtlessly tossed in the corner. When she'd found everything that she needed, she quietly

backed out of the room and slowly closed the door.

“Either ye truly are a thief, or ye seek to spend the night in Alec Sinclair’s bed,” a rough voice commented behind her. Gasping, Cora whirled around. At the sight of King Edward, all the blood drained from her face.

“Your Majesty,” Cora stuttered. “I had thought that you would be downstairs enjoying the celebration. It is, after all, in your honor.”

A small smile played along his lips. “I appreciate the honor of yer greeting, but it does not quite meet yer eyes. I’m not yer King, am I?”

“That doesn’t mean that you don’t deserve my respect,” Cora whispered.

“I am an old man. I needed to rest before tonight. Would ye do me the honor of escorting me down?”

Panicked, Cora looked down at the bundle in her arms. Not only would she not be able to escape, but Alec would be furious if he found her on the arm of the King. But how could she disobey? Edward saw her dilemma and chuckled. “I saw ye spying on us during the training. Sinclair was rather closed-mouthed about ye when I asked, but I quickly discovered that not everyone would hide ye. Yer friend Mary was quite open when it came to ye.”

Bloody hell, Mary! “What did you learn?”

“I learned that you are a mystery. No one seems to know where ye came from or who ye are. Six months ye’ve spent in the dungeons, and no one knows yer crime. If ye’ve nothing to fear, why not explain the truth to Alec and win yer freedom?”

“I have answered his questions. I am not a thief, but he does not believe me. I find it rather strange that I would confess my sins and still be accused of lying,” Cora said defiantly.

Edward laughed. “I do know that Alec Sinclair is a fair man. ’Tis why I chose him.”

“I would think that Innes Campbell would be your first choice. Isn’t that what you decided six months ago?” As soon as the words were

out of her mouth, she realized her error.

The King watched her carefully. “I did not have all the facts when I made those initial decisions. The consequences of my actions have forced me to review them.”

He knew. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind that he knew exactly who she was. The question now was what he planned on doing about it. “All of those decisions, my Lord? Or just the ones that affect the MacKays?”

“Claire, isn’t it?” he asked with an innocent expression on his face. “I do believe that ye have a story to tell. Why do ye not tell it?”

“I’m a stranger here, King Edward. Who could I possibly trust to divulge my secrets? It’s not like the family that I left behind. A vulnerable younger sister who still believes in the goodness of everyone.”

Her vague confession hung heavily between them, and he glanced down at the sword in her hands. “My dear Claire, if ye would be so good to return those items to Sinclair’s chambers, I can assure ye that ye will not be needing them tonight.”

“But—” she protested. He put his hands up to stop her.

“Join me this evening. I insist.”

Here she was, taking a chance on the King’s kindness, and he meant to keep her here! Still, what could she do? Defying him on Scottish grounds would no doubt be treason. Straightening her spine, she gave him a little nod. “Very well.”

Returning to Alec’s chambers, she dumped the items on the floor and shut the door with such force that the King’s eyes widened. “Ye must get yer temper from yer mother, for Duncan MacKay was soft inside.”

If there was any doubt that King Edward knew her father, it was dashed in one sentence. Taking the King’s arm, she held her head high as she walked him down the stairs. There was little choice but to meet the fate that awaited her with as much dignity as possible.

The fiddlers and bards had caused a frenzy as the MacKays danced and drank and laughed. Even Alec could feel the tension leaving his body as he surveyed the grand hall. The dozen of Sinclair warriors were getting along famously with the MacKays, and Innes Campbell had been ordered to leave with his tail tucked between his legs. His men trained that day with vigor and even some excitement although it was difficult to tell if his King was happy with the results.

"If ye continue scowling, there isn't a woman here who will want to share yer bed," Shane laughed as he clapped him on the shoulder. "This is a celebration. Try to have some fun!"

"Tis may verra well be the last night we spend here," Alec reminded him. "Have ye had a conversation with the King today? Do ye have any idea what he's thinking? His face is as still as a stone wall."

"As a matter of fact, I did have a conversation with His Majesty. He had a few questions about ye and the clan, but he was far more interested in Miss Claire."

"What?" Alec's head snapped up. "Ye must be jesting. What would he want with her?" The fact is that King Edward caught him staring at her earlier today, but Alec had hoped his quick dismissal of the conversation would douse the King's interest.

Apparently not.

"I wasn't the only one he was asking. Where is Claire? I would think she'd be helping the other servants. It won't look good if yer servants are disobeying orders."

"I ordered her to stay in her room," Alec said sourly. "I don't want a thief running around with the King here."

Shane's eyes widened. "Then I suppose ye'll be verra unhappy if the thief had not only disobeyed ye but was gracing King Edward's arm?"

"Like that would ever hap—" His words died in his throat when a hush fell over the hall. As everyone bowed, Alec turned his head to see King Edward making his way to him.

Cora was as pale as a ghost.

"What the hell," he grumbled under his breath, but he dutifully stood and bowed. "Yer Majesty. I'm pleased to see ye well-rested."

"I doonae know about that," Edward said with a small smile. "'Tis hard to rest with such merriment happening. I was pleased to meet the lovely Miss Claire on my way here and asked her to escort me."

"I see. Miss Claire is a servant here. I'm sure she'll be happy to get to her duties now that she's here," Alec said as he glared at her. She averted her gaze.

"Nonsense. I feel the need for some female companionship during dinner, and 'tis been a long time since an English lass has been by my side. I'm sure ye will not mind, will ye?"

Alec gritted his teeth. "Of course not. Miss Claire, I'm happy for ye to join us."

"Wonderful." Someone pulled out his chair, and the elderly man sat heavily at the head of the table. "Perhaps ye'll entertain me with a dance later, Alec. I'm sure Miss Claire will oblige ye."

Could this night get any worse? After what nearly happened yesterday evening, he was afraid to even be near her, let alone embrace her during a dance in front of the whole clan.

Once the King was seated, Alec waved his hand to the musicians, and they started back up again. The dancing began as before, and soon the celebration was back in full swing. Mary came around quickly with a fresh plate of food for the King, and her eyes widened at the sight of Cora.

"Thank ye, girl," Edward said gallantly. "I trust that ye won't hold it against yer friend that she entertain me tonight? I find her story to be

fascinating.”

“I’m sure she’ll be pleased with yer attention, Sire,” Mary said as she curtsied. Cora sucked in her breath, and Alec narrowed his eyes. There was something going on here.

“Aye,” was all Edward said before reaching for his goblet. Mary gave Cora a pleased smile before scurrying away. She looked more terrified than pleased with her circumstances. What had transpired between them before they had made their appearance? “Alec, tell me of yer sister. Is she of age now?”

“Grace? She turned eighteen this past summer. Connor would have married her off two years ago, but he’s having trouble finding a man that will have her,” Alec said with a grimace.

“Really?” Edward said in surprise. “She was such a beauty last time I laid eyes on her. Has she some new affliction?”

“Aye,” Alec snorted. “She’s mental. She’s decided that she’ll not marry anyone because she has far too much fun driving Connor and I mad. Just last month Connor caught her learning swordplay.”

“She’ll need a strong man to take her in hand,” Edward agreed.

“I would think that in a place like this, a woman’s strength and independence would be welcome,” Cora said harshly.

“Claire,” Alec growled. “Watch yer tongue.”

“Please,” the King said mildly. “Enlighten me. What do ye mean ‘a place like this’?”

“We do not face the same threats and conditions in London as you do here. Women are bred to either serve men or make dutiful wives. But here, you have dissent between the clans and a constant battle against the harsh elements. With trained women by your side, you stand a far greater chance at success.”

“Trained women?” Edward asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Tell me, Laird. Was your sister impressive with a sword?” Cora asked.

“Yes,” Alec admitted.

“Then there you go,” Cora said primly.

“Were ye bred to make a dutiful wife?” Alec asked in a low voice. “Or to serve a man?”

His words were dangerously seductive, and for a moment, he forgot the King seated between them. Cora met his gaze coolly, but he saw the redness that stained her cheeks. “I have endured more than one season in London,” she replied.

“So you’re a Lady then? I’ll ask again, what were ye doing here in the MacKay prisons?”

“Alec,” Edward said sharply. “I would enjoy my dinner in peace.”

“My apologies,” Alec said as he stood. “If ye’ll excuse me, I’d like to stretch my legs.”

“Take Miss Claire dancing,” the King said. “That should help ye blow off some steam.”

Alec opened his mouth to protest, but Edward had already returned to his meal. Knowing there was nothing else he could do, he presented Cora with his hand. She took a deep breath before accepting it. Soon he twirled her around in the sea of bodies dancing between the tables.

“What do ye think yer trying to achieve?” Alec hissed. He wasn’t worried about anyone overhearing them above the laughter and cheers.

“I’m not trying to achieve anything,” she snapped. “If you must know, I stole back in your room for the supplies that you took from me so that I could escape. Your King caught me and ordered that I escort him to the festivities.”

“And ye think admitting that ye were trying to leave me is better than this?” Alec asked incredulously. Someone bumped into her, and she stumbled into his arms. As her body molded against his, he caught his breath. Beneath the thin serving dress, he could feel every curve of her body.

“You could be so easily rid of me,” she breathed as she stared at him. “If you would only let me go.”

“And why would I want to be rid of ye?” he asked silkily. “When I can keep ye here until ye consent to be mine.”

“You would seduce a thief?”

“I would think ye’d be happy. While I slept in my bed, sated from yer body, ye could take whatever yer heart desires. Unless, of course, there’s nothing here that ye want?”

“Maybe I’ve already obtained what I came here for,” she said as she turned her face towards him. Unable to help himself, he bent his head to taste her again when someone slapped him hard on the back.

Furious, he whirled around only to find Jamie handing him a tankard of ale. “Forgive me, but ye looked like ye might do something ye wouldn’t want prying eyes to see,” he said meaningfully.

“Please excuse me,” Cora said suddenly as she bolted through the crowd. Alec watched as she curtsied in front of Edward and exchanged some words. Whatever he said must have greatly upset her. With her shoulders slumped in defeat, she returned to her chair and pushed her plate of food away.

Jamie shook his head. “Ye weren’t really going to kiss her in front of everyone, were ye?”

“She means to escape,” Alec said as he stared at her. “I think I mean to let her.”

“So ye’ll let her go then? Perhaps then you can focus on the problem at hand.”

Alec grabbed the tankard and headed back to the table. Nodding his head to Cora, he took his seat next to Edward. “Miss Claire, I’ve decided that ye’ve paid yer dues. Ye are welcome to leave this very night. I’ll make sure ye have a horse and all the provisions that ye need.”

“Really?” Cora breathed. “I promise that I’ll send everything back as soon as I get home. Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me.”

“Miss Claire, I must insist that ye not leave until tomorrow,” Edward

said quickly. "I would like yer company awhile longer."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Edward took a sip of his ale and pushed his empty plate aside. "Yer kitchen staff is excellent, Sinclair. I have to admit that I am pleased with the improvements that ye've made here, but I still fear that ye have much to do. I can see that despite the merriment happening here, ye have not quite won over the respect of the MacKays. I understand that not more than a week has passed, and it takes time."

"Yes, Sire."

"Still, the MacKays talk highly of Innes Campbell. I'm afraid it might take more than just time to win them over. I gave ye this position because ye have shown strength and wisdom over the years, but I may have underestimated the MacKay pride. While I would have my orders followed, I'll not have dissension among this land," Edward warned.

Alec swallowed hard. Was Edward already going to remove him from his new position? "I understand," he said quietly.

"Eight months ago, I'd signed a decree giving Innes the right to take over this clan rather than Seth once Duncan MacKay passed away," Edward said easily. "All he had to do was marry a young woman."

"Excuse me?" This was the first time that Alec had ever heard of this. "Yer only requirement was that he take a wife?"

"No, not just any wife. I verra much wanted the MacKay blood to stay in charge. Duncan approached me and told me of his fears that his son would see the clan in ruin. Tales of Seth's cruelty had reached me, but it only seemed right than a MacKay rule the MacKays. Duncan informed me that he had a daughter. I agreed that if Innes Campbell married Duncan's daughter, he could disown Seth MacKay."

Next to him, Cora stilled. Alec cocked his head. "So what happened?"

"A little more than six months ago, Duncan went to England to retrieve his daughter. Alas, they were both slain by highway robbers upon their journey."

"Six months ago?" Alec stared at Cora. He'd met Duncan a handful of

times. Those green eyes...that lush auburn hair...

Edward smiled. "Yes, indeed. If by some miracle, the girl survived, whomever married her would gain the respect of the MacKay clan. Although, since I've already decreed that she marry Innes, I suppose it's just as well that she died that night. If Innes were to marry her now, he'd be able to usurp you."

Alec locked eyes with Cora. "What was the daughter's name?" he asked coldly.

"I believe it was Cora. Cora Isles."

Cora watched with trepidation as Alec pushed his chair back and stood. “Miss Claire, I believe it’s time for ye to retire.”

When Edward didn’t bother stopping him, she wondered if this was it. Would his King sanction her murder to ensure that Innes Campbell didn’t take the clan? “I don’t need an escort,” she said bravely. “I can find the way to my room on my own.”

“Ye won’t be going to yer room,” he growled. “I’ll meet ye in my chambers in ten minutes, and so help me God, if ye aren’t there, I promise that ye will not like the consequences.”

Once again, the Scottish King didn’t interfere. With a quick curtsy, she quickly fled to the stairwell. Part of her wondered what would happen if she made her escape. No doubt Alec would catch up with her and gleefully dole out her punishment.

For the first time, she lamented not being more skilled on a horse. Her mother didn’t have any, so she’d never experienced a horse until the Thistles took her in. They taught her side-saddle, which would only hinder her efforts to get away quickly.

What was the King thinking? What could possibly be achieved by telling the truth?

Entering his room, she shut the door and thought briefly about bolting it. She could lock herself in and make her escape out the window, but as she glanced down, the mere thought of the height brought her to a dizzying panic. She’d never been much of a climber.

Unwilling to sit on the bed, she pulled out a chair and perched primly on it. There was only one course of action left to take, so she began weaving a realistic tale that would show Alec that she was not Cora

Isles and therefore no threat to him.

When the door banged open, Alec strode in with fire in his eyes. “Miss Claire,” he growled. “I believe that ye have some explaining to do.”

“As I’ve already explained, I did not seek the King’s counsel. He caught me in your room and demanded that I joined him at dinner. I did not go out of my way to embarrass you, and I did not tell him that I was thief.”

“But yer not a thief!” Alec roared as he slammed the door shut behind him. “Are ye, Cora?”

“My name is Claire,” she said hotly. Standing, she crossed her arms and faced him. “You want to hear my story? Just over six months ago, Seth MacKay visited England and swindled my father out of the family ring. I managed to track him down here, but he caught me before I took it back. Rather than have me hanged, he decided to take an interest me. He kept me in the prisons in hopes of breaking me.”

He stared at her. “There was no ring on his finger when I killed him, and there are no reports of a ring in the inventory.”

“I can’t explain that. I had hoped to get my hands on it before I left, but it’s not worth my life.”

“It’s a nice story,” he muttered quietly. “Did ye come up with that just now? Ye’ve a quick mind, but there’s just one problem.”

“What’s that?” she asked nervously.

“When I look at ye, I can see Duncan MacKay staring back at me. Ye have his eyes. So it would seem to me that the only thing ye plan on stealing is the MacKay clan, and I wilnae let that happen!”

“I don’t want it!” she shouted suddenly. Surprising them both, she began to beat her fists against his chest in anger. “Over six months ago, a man that I’d never met before turned my entire life upside down, and I spent months being tormented by the likes of Seth MacKay, my supposed half-brother. I don’t want your stupid clan. I don’t want anything to do with this place! I just want to leave!”

Alec caught her wrists in his hand and forced her to sit back down.

“Cora. Cora,” he said in a low voice. “For God’s sake, calm yerself.”

Embarrassed by her admission and her outburst, she jerked her hands away from him. “I do not belong here.”

“If yer Duncan MacKay’s daughter, ye do.” He pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down. “Tell me what happened. From the beginning.”

Cora stared at her hands. “My mother was a beautiful woman. She was coveted by many, and she was so charitable. No matter what anyone calls her, I’ll always love and admire her. I’m not ashamed of where I come from.”

Looking up, she saw the question in his eyes, but he didn’t interrupt. Taking a deep breath, she plunged into her story. “My mother was a whore. Not a desperate and poor woman on the streets, but a wealthy and independent one. Her door was open to any woman seeking asylum, and many poor families brought their older children to her. She would train them in whatever they wished. Those that wanted could follow in her footsteps, but she also secured them jobs as maids and cooks. If a woman decided to follow in her footsteps, she would know that she’d never be treated unfairly. My mother even made men sign contracts before they could take them out as mistresses, and if they were mistreated in any way, those contracts allowed the woman to leave.”

Alec stared in amazement. “They wouldn’t have held up in a court of law.”

“On the contrary. My mother was well-known in the justice circles. They were honored. She didn’t just provide safety to women. If a man found himself wounded in an embarrassing situation, such as facing his lover’s husband, he could come to my mother for healing. She had a gift for making people better.”

“That’s how you learned?”

“I wanted to apprentice with a doctor, but my mother wouldn’t have it. She wanted me to marry well and have everything for free that she had to work so hard for. She died before that could happen. I was thirteen years old.”

“Duncan didn’t claim ye?”

“He probably didn’t know. Lady Thistle was one of the benefactors of the home. She was the daughter of the Duke, but rather than marry for status, she married far beneath her station for love. Still, she had tons of money and spent it and her time with my mother helping those in need. She adopted me quietly until arrangements could be made for the women in the home. Without my mother’s status, Lady Thistle feared that the courts would no longer protect them. It was months before word finally got out. Lady Thistle had hoped that her status as a duke’s daughter and the money that I had inherited from my mother would help me find a husband, but without my mother’s protection, I was simply the daughter of a whore. Still, my family loved me, and I knew that even if I never married, I’d be secure and happy.”

Alec sat quietly while she continued with her story. “Several months ago a strange man showed up on our doorstep. He had a letter from the King of Scotland naming me the heir to the MacKay clan provided I marry Innes Campbell. The Thistles were so shocked that they wanted to go to the King of England to disband the contract, but I knew there was no reason for him to intervene on my account. Despite the Thistles’ love for me, I knew my station in life.

“My father gave me time to say my goodbyes. I could tell that he wanted a relationship with me, but I was stubborn. I couldn’t understand why he would leave my mother if he truly loved her as he claimed. I could only be convinced that there was nothing but desire between them, and I despised his claims otherwise. But that night, when we left, Seth MacKay attacked the carriage. And after he’d killed our father, I felt guilty that I hadn’t done more to give the man his due.”

“Seth killed Duncan?” Alec whispered. “Tis a good thing that he’s already dead. The MacKays are no friends to the Sinclairs, but Duncan was a good man. We mourned his passing. Why didn’t he kill ye?”

Here was the moment of truth. She could admit that Innes was involved, but it was her word against the brother of a laird. If no one believed her, Innes would be free to take his revenge.

She didn't know Alec. She couldn't trust him with the whole truth. "He was fascinated by me. He took more pleasure of my torment than he would my death."

"Does Innes know who you are?"

Vehemently, she shook her head. "I don't think Seth disclosed the truth to anyone for fear of the King's missive. No one recognized me until your king. He must have suspected when he'd learned how long I'd been here."

"There's something that ye are not telling me, Cora. I will have the whole truth."

"I don't know what else you want from me. I'm begging you to let me go. I have no desire to control this clan. I have no desire to even stay in Scotland. This place is horrid. Its people are horrid, and I just want to go home!"

Alec regarded her closely. Standing, he began to pace, and the silence between them thickened. "The King knows who ye are," he said finally. "And he wants MacKay blood in charge. 'Tis a blessing that he's even giving me this opportunity."

"What opportunity?" she asked suspiciously.

"If no one claims ye, the King will force ye to marry Innes, and he'll give the MacKays over to them. He decreed it six months ago, and he has nothing more than the rumors of Innes's cruelty to dissuade him. If ye claim that ye had no idea that ye were betrothed, and if ye marry for love beforehand, the King will not dissolve the marriage."

"Marry for love? What are you talking about?"

"Cora Isles, ye will marry me. In the morning. And when ye face King Edward, ye will declare yer undying love to me."

With a gasp, she stood. "I will do no such thing! You said that I could leave! I'm not marrying you! You despise me!"

"Oh, I more than despise ye," Alec threatened when he whirled around. He stalked towards her, and she moved away until her back hit the wall. As he towered over her, she gritted her teeth. "I doonae

trust ye. If ye plan to take all of this away from me, then I am pleased to thwart yer plans. If ye are not lying to me, then ye should be happy. Ye get the fruitful marriage that yer mother always wanted for ye. Ye act as though I'm the man of your dreams, and ye will marry me, and if ye doonae, I promise that ye'll find naught but hell shackled to a man like Innes."

"You would keep me here against my will?" she whispered.

"There is nothing that I would not do to keep this clan out of the hands of Innes Campbell. Believe me when I tell ye that an alliance with him will only spell doom for ye."

When she still didn't answer him, he leaned down for a bruising kiss. Gone was the gentle man who had rescued her from the prison and the charming man who had attempted to seduce the truth from her. This was a man who would let nothing stand in his way.

His entire body pressed against her, and his hands settled on her waist. "Cora," he whispered harshly when he finally broke away. "What will it be?"

"I guess you haven't really given me much of a choice, have you? I will marry you. Now let me go."

"Not a chance, love," he breathed into her ear. "I doonae trust ye to not make a run for it. Ye'll stay with me until the priest gets here."

"If you think..."

"Stop yer worrying," he said as he stepped back. "If there's even a remote chance that ye remain chaste, I won't sully ye before our wedding night. Get yerself comfortable, my dear. It appears that we're both going to endure a long night."

Alec was awake long before the first of the day's sunlight streamed through the window. He pushed himself off the furs on the floor and turned his head to ensure that his future bride was in his bed.

She tossed and turned through most of the night, but a few hours ago, Alec heard her finally still. Looking over, he saw her splayed out under his blankets. She practically took up the entire bed.

It was the first time he'd ever seen her hair down. The long silky strands tumbled over the pillow in messy curls and waves. Even in the prison, when her hair was knotted on top of her head and unwashed, he knew her hair would be beautiful. He longed to touch it now, but he was afraid he wouldn't stop. All night long he had to remind himself that slaking his desire for her before their wedding night would only prove his weakness towards her. She was no longer a thief but a dangerous woman who could take away everything that belonged to him.

He would not let Connor down, and he would not let the King down. If Edward didn't truly want Sinclair to rule, he would never have told him about Cora.

She was still hiding something. What were the chances that she was in league with Innes Campbell?

It didn't matter. In a few short hours, he would take care of everything.

Before he'd retired for the evening, he'd sent a message for the nearest priest to be summoned. He and Cora would be married before King Edward even woke up, and he'd secure his place as laird. An heir in

Cora's belly would be even better.

She started to stir, and he began dressing for the day. Without bothering to hide his nakedness, he turned his back to her and smiled when he heard her gasp. "Awake, my sweet bride?" he murmured when he turned around.

Cora immediately averted her eyes. "Must you do that now?"

"Please, look yer fill. I don't mind. I'd like ye to be familiar with my body before tonight."

"I hope you don't mind that you will have to marry me dressed as a servant. I'm afraid that I have nothing suitable to wear." The tone of her voice told him that she wasn't afraid at all. Alec had a feeling that if she had her way, she'd marry him in a burlap sack.

"Not to worry, my dear," he said as he finished dressing. "I've already made arrangements. Duncan kept a few of his wife's dresses which should do."

When Cora let out a dry laugh, he gave her a sharp look. "That amuses ye?"

"I am the daughter of my father's mistress. I don't think anyone will find it amusing that I'm getting married in his wife's dress."

"I see yer point. Well, if this was a true love match, I'd worry about the bad luck it might bring. But since 'tis not, I don't think you have anything to worry about."

The pain that crossed her face struck a nerve with him, but he refused to acknowledge it. The lass had all but confessed that no one would have her in England. Now she was to wed a laird. It should please her. "Ye can make things easier on ye if ye just tell me what I want to know."

"I've told you everything," she whispered.

"No. Ye haven't. Not that it matters. Soon it won't matter anymore. Do ye want to write to yer family and let them know that yer alive?"

"No," she said quickly. Too quickly. "It's best if they don't know what I've been through. I fear Lord Thistle would not endure the news

well.”

“They really care for ye?”

“Does it really surprise you that someone might love me?” she said bitterly as she slid off the bed. “May I be excused so that I may get ready for my wedding day?”

“Get Mary to help ye,” he said gruffly. “I’ll have the dress sent to ye room. I want to get this done by breakfast.”

“Your impatience to marry me warms my heart.”

Before he could reply, she’d slipped out the door. Running his hands over his face, he went to wake up his friends and Kane MacKay so that they might serve as witnesses.

Half an hour later, they were all gathered in the great hall with annoyed looks on their sleep-deprived faces. He had no doubt that they were still suffering from hangovers. From what he could tell, the celebration went well into the night.

Father Kevin Donnelly looked entirely too nervous to suit his needs. From what he knew, the Englishman was hoping to convert the Scottish heathens although he always looked terrified when he traveled from clan to clan. “Laird Sinclair, this is most unusual,” he said after he cleared his throat.

“But Father Donnelly, I am in love,” Alec drawled. “What could be more unusual about that?”

“Ye do realize that I must hear the bride’s consent before the ceremony can begin, yes?”

“Father, ye wound me,” Alec said with a grin. “Do ye really think a woman would turn all of this down?”

His friends, and even Kane, chuckled. Jamie stepped forward and leaned in close. “Alec, when I told ye to find a way to dispense of yer obsession with the lady, I did not mean for ye to marry the wench. Are ye truly in love?”

“In the audience of the King, I am. Doonae worry, Jamie. I have not lost all my senses. My motivation will be revealed in the King’s

presence.”

“Did ye get her pregnant?” Stephen asked as he sauntered closer. “The whole hall saw ye run after her like a madman last night.”

That was even more perfect. More support for this ridiculous idea of a love match.

Kane suddenly cleared his throat, and Alec whipped his head around. Cora was dressed in a gorgeous green silk dress that dipped low over her bosoms and fit to every curve in her body. Her auburn hair was coiled in a braid around her head, and when she walked, she commanded the attention of everyone in the room. Never had Alec seen anyone look more beautiful in his entire life. At that moment, he couldn't imagine anyone in England not thinking that she was a lady.

She looked like a goddess.

“Miss Claire,” Stephen said as he bowed. “Ye look breathtaking.”

“Actually, since you have all magnanimously agreed to attend my wedding, you should know that my name is Cora. Cora Isles.”

Alec watched Kane's expression closely, but there was no surprise. The man had no idea that Duncan had a daughter.

Father Donnelly walked over and took her hands. “Lady Isles, I am Father Devin Donnelly. I will officiate your wedding, but first I must have a private word with you.”

“Father, if you are concerned that I am here against my will, I can assure you that I am not. From the moment I laid eyes on the Laird Sinclair, I was drawn in by his kindness. He rescued me from dire circumstances, and I have adored him ever since. He is a gentle, kind, and fair man. I am overjoyed to be his wife.”

Her loud declaration was followed by a deafening silence. Even Alec could only stare at her. She slipped into the role so well that even he believed it for a moment.

“That must have been some night last night,” Stephen whispered in his ear.

Growling, Alec pushed his friend away. “Father, I trust that will

suffice to satisfy ye?”

Apparently not. “Lady Isles, I really must insist that we speak in private.”

“Tis all right, darling,” Alec said as he nodded. “We’ll be right here waiting.”

He didn’t mind giving Cora some time alone with Father Donnelly. He trusted that she’d make the right decision.

A few minutes passed, and he began to doubt his decision. What if she loved Innes? She could deny everything she’d just claimed and ruin his whole plan in one fell swoop. With a scowl, he crossed the hall and opened the door into the kitchen. Startled, Cora jumped. “Laird Sinclair. So impatient,” she said with a fake smile. “What did I tell ye, Father? We are meant to be together.”

“But Lady Isles, don’t you think he has the right to know?”

“My father is dead, Father Donnelly. If he cannot explain his actions, I certainly cannot. In this regard, I am making my own decisions. You will marry us this morning.”

The priest sighed and stood. “Very well. We’ll get started right away.” He walked back into the hall leaving Cora and Alec alone.

“Problem?” Alec asked quietly.

“It appears that Father Donnelly recognized my name. My father told him of my impending marriage to Innes Campbell, but he doesn’t know why.”

“Ye could have told him.”

“But I did not. Next time you think me devious, remember this moment.” She swept past him with her head held high, and he followed. There was a hollow feeling in his chest, and he began to wonder if he was making the right decision.

In the hall, Stephen, Jamie, Shane, and Kane waited for Alec. Cora stood in front of the priest. That irritating smile was still plastered on her face, but she twisted her fingers around themselves, giving her away.

“Laird Sinclair?” Father Donnelly asked nervously. “Are you ready?”

Alec took his place next to Cora and wed himself to the woman he knew he would never love.



It had only taken minutes for Cora Isles to become Cora Sinclair. Seated at the head of the table, next to her husband, she waited in terror as the rest of the MacKays began to trickle in to break their fast. Alec hadn't said a word to her since the ceremony, much to the distress of Father Donnelly.

“Child,” he whispered to her urgently. “If you have any hopes to annul this marriage, you must not consummate it! I will not be able to help you after that.”

“Father Donnelly,” Alec interrupted coldly, “ye have traveled far to join us this morning. We have a chamber prepared for ye, and no one will think twice if ye choose to rest for the day.”

“But—”

“Shane, could ye please escort Father Donnelly to his room? I'm sure he is verra tired, and I would not want to bother him any further.” His command was clear, and Cora felt sorry for the priest. He was obviously a good man who would strive to see that she hadn't just made a mistake.

“You didn't need to banish him,” Cora admonished in a quiet voice. “He's only concerned for me.”

“Have ye given him reason to be concerned, Lady Sinclair?”

His silky voice sent a shiver down her spine, and she turned her head. Is this how things would be? He ran hot and cold. She feared she would never know which face her husband would put on for the day. How could she live like this?

“I did as you wanted. Is there any hope that you'll leave me alone?” she whispered desperately.

Instead of responding, he took her hand and brushed his finger over

her knuckles. Surprised at the loving caress, she looked up and saw the soft look on his face. Breathing softly, she reached up to touch his cheek, but his eyes immediately turned to the front of the room. Cora followed his gaze and felt her heart drop.

King Edward had entered.

Alec stood, and when she didn't immediately follow suit, the gentle caress turned into a squeeze. Quickly, she stood and curtsied as King Edward approached them. Edward took in her fancy gown and raised an eyebrow. "A bit early for a ball, isn't it my dear?"

"Yes, my Lord. But I am not prepared to attend a ball. Today is my wedding day."

"Sinclair?" Edward said questioningly. "Ye have married yer thief?"

Alec cleared his throat. "Actually, to that, I have an announcement to make. If ye do not mind?"

"This should be good," Edward muttered and nodded his head.

Alec raised his glass. "Yer Majesty, MacKays, and Sinclairs, I proudly present my wife, Cora Isles. Nearly seven months ago, my wife learned of her true heritage. She is the daughter of Duncan MacKay, and I bid ye accept her with open arms. She has witnessed her father at the hands of his son, and faced six torturous months paying for the sins of her birth. With the MacKay blood coursing through her veins, I trust that ye will accept her as my wife, yer Lady, and the mother of the future Laird MacKay. Any babe that she produces will honor Duncan MacKay with his name."

Loud cheers echoed off the stone walls as everyone raised their glasses. As they toasted, Cora turned her head to watch Edward's face. There was a mix of anger and pity. "You testify that Seth killed his father?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Did he act alone?"

Cora hesitated. Edward was now her king by birth, and she felt sure that she shouldn't lie to him. As she opened her mouth, Alec saved her

from any answer.

“Yer Majesty, it would be a great honor if ye sanctioned my marriage.”

“I believe I sanctioned a marriage between Cora Isles and Innes Campbell. I have half a mind to demand that ye dissolve this farce here and now.”

“’Tis a love match,” Alec said as he put his arms around her. “And we had no idea of any betrothal when we fell in love.”

“I will not be made a fool,” the King declared quietly. “If I should later discover that ye are lying to me and this is not a love match, the consequences will be dire. I can strip ye of yer title whenever I want, Sinclair. Doonae doubt that.”

Cora swallowed hard. Edward knew that they weren’t really in love, and yet he was insisting that they continue this charade. What was the point? Was he simply trying to save face if and when Innes Campbell approached him?

Suddenly, Edward smiled and clapped Alec on the shoulder. “Congratulations. Connor will be pleased to hear that ye’ve finally settled down, although, between the two of ye, I’m not sure which one has broken more hearts. My dear Lady Sinclair, I have no doubt that ye want to spend this day with yer husband, but I’m afraid that I’ll be leaving at first light tomorrow, and there are still some things that we need to discuss.”

“Of course.” Cora nodded her head. “Take as long as ye need.”

“Doonae fear my dear, I will do nothing to interfere with yer wedding night.”

As the King winked at her, her heart sank. Her wedding night? That had been the farthest thing from her mind, but she felt the heat of Alec’s gaze on her and knew there was no way around it. Tonight, she would lose yet another part of herself.

It was amazing for Cora to watch how the rest of the clan interacted with her now. Those that had previously scorned her were now acting as though they were old friends, and her previous friends were keeping their distance. It broke her heart, and she vowed that she would find a way to make it right. She had lied to all of them to protect those she loved, but she had come to love her friends as well, and now they were baffled and hurting.

Despite how some felt about Alec, everyone acted as though any marriage should be celebrated, and they did it with great gusto. There was dancing, singing, laughter, and drinking. When was the last time Cora had seen such joy anywhere? And it was all for her.

At the center of attention, she sat in her chair at the end of the table and tried to look relaxed. It hadn't escaped her notice that King Edward's attention was trained on her or that Alec was also watching her like a hawk.

She didn't know what it was like to be in love, and now she had to act the part.

"Come dance with me!" Jamie declared heartily and pulled her out of her seat before she could say no. Before he could get her too far across the floor, a hand grabbed her around the waist and pulled her up against a hard body.

Alec. His warmth spread through her, and she flushed at the knowledge that she could already recognize him without turning around. "I believe the first dance belongs to me," he said a little too possessively. "Off with ye."

Shooing Jamie away, he tugged her with the other dancers before he

effortlessly picked her up and spun her.

“Oh!” Breathless, she gripped his large shoulders as they danced. Her heart fluttered as she tried to keep up with him, but this type of dancing was so different from what she was used to. In England, it was proper with contained emotions, but here, the steps and laughter were large and expressive. Joy spread through her even as she tried to focus and concentrate. She’d always loved music and dancing.

“Smile,” he murmured in her ear. “Ye are dancing with the man that ye love.”

Immediately, the euphoria slipped away with the reminder that every smile he gave her, every touch of her body, was all for an act. Whatever chance she and Alec had of having a real relationship, or even having a friendship, had slipped away at the knowledge of her lies, and that hurt her more than she wanted to admit.

Finally, at the end of the song, the crowd cheered, and Alec slipped his hand around her waist. Afraid he was going to ask her for another dance when the instruments started up again, she forced a smile. “I think I need a moment to breathe.”

With a frown, he released her, and she made her way out of the great hall and to the great entrance of the keep. Sounds from the doors told her that the village was celebrating just as enthusiastically outside as they were inside.

Was there nowhere she could hide?

“Lady Cora,” the King said behind her.

Swearing inwardly in a way that her family would not approve of, she turned and dipped into a curtsy. “Your Majesty.”

“Will ye come walk with me in the courtyard? I could use a little sunshine.”

Grateful for at least some air, she took his arm and led him to the small courtyard. “I appreciate you accepting my hasty marriage to Alec,” she began softly. “I had not realized—”

“Careful,” Edward interrupted. “Lying to me is an offense that I will

not be able to forgive.”

Immediately, she clamped her mouth shut. She walked a thin line. He expected them to display the face of true lovers in public, but he also knew the truth even if he wasn’t allowed to admit it. “What can you tell me of my father?”

At that, he smiled softly. “Duncan was a good man. Even with the mistakes he made, he was a good husband—despite his indiscretion—a good father, and a good laird. I respected him a great deal.”

“A good father?” she echoed with just a hint of disdain. A father who had ignored her and raised a man who would be a monster.

Edward sighed heavily. “Ye are thinking of Seth. I know ye witnessed and experienced horrors at his hand. How a man could grow up to be so different from his father, I will never know.”

“You allowed him to take over the clan after my father’s death,” she said hesitantly. She couldn’t go around accusing him of being a bad king, but she had to know why. She couldn’t wrap her head around Scottish politics.

“We place a great deal of emphasis on bloodlines as does the English,” he reminded her. “I had heard rumors of Seth’s true nature, enough to allow the rule to fall to Innes if he were to marry ye, but when Duncan died, and ye had supposedly died, I had no evidence to deny Seth his heritage. When I saw what he had done to this clan, I acted as quickly as I could.”

“The Sinclairs. Why them?”

“The Sinclairs’ father was a good friend of mine, and I have been pleased to see that Connor and Alec are just as strong and honest as he was. Connor has made an excellent laird, and I believed that Alec will as well.”

“But Innes?”

“Aye, he was displeased with my decision, but in the six months that Seth abused his own people, Innes did nothing to bring their plight to my attention. So I passed the title to Alec, and now that he has Duncan’s blood to support him, I believe he’ll find his rule much

smoother here.”

Cora stopped their slow walk to take a minute to study the older man. “Despite everything that you know now, would you still have upheld your decree and forced me to marry Innes?”

“Aye,” he said without batting an eye. “I rarely go back on my word, and I will be most unhappy if this marriage does not work out.”

A shiver crawled up her spine, and she swallowed hard. The warning was still there. He would still uphold his decree if she gave him reason to.

“Ye had family in England. Ye didnae want to invite them to the celebrations?” he asked mildly.

Tears threatened to well up in her eyes, and she blinked them away. “They thought me dead. It is easier for them to continue thinking so.”

Edward studied her for a few minutes before he sighed. “Scotland can be harsh for someone not used to our climates and temperaments. Ye might find it difficult to acclimate if ye are not surrounded by people that ye love.”

She stared at him coldly. “I was chained to a wall and brutalized for six months. I imagine that being the mistress of a keep will be far easier for me to manage in comparison.”

With a strange smile on his face, he bowed his head. “Forgive me, Lady Cora. Ye may be delicate looking, but ye have the spine of yer father. I believe that Alec has finally found himself the perfect wife.”

Before she could answer, shouts exploded from the great hall, and they had nothing to do with the festivities.

“We should return,” he said. “It seems as if the Campbells are here to offer their congratulations.”

Alec was furious that Innes had come unannounced with a dozen armed men, but he wasn't surprised. It only served to prove what he'd already feared.

There was a traitor on his lands. Someone was feeding information to Innes.

After receiving word of his arrival, Alec allowed Innes and his men into the keep. If he decided to draw blood in the presence of the King, it would be on his head. Alec lost nothing by letting him in.

"Campbell," he greeted softly. The music had died down as soon as Campbell stalked in, and when his men drew their weapons, his own stood, even in their drunken stupor, and armed themselves while they awaited orders. "Are ye here to congratulate me?"

"Ye bastard!" Innes hissed. "Ye dare take what is rightfully mine? I demand that ye drop this folly before ye sully my woman!"

Sully his woman. So Cora was a virgin. Remembering his own accusations, his gut tightened. Of course Cora wasn't Innes's lover. If Innes had known who Cora was, he simply would have married her. So why did he feel like there was something going on between Innes and Cora that he didn't understand?

Before Alec could answer, the crowd parted as Edward and Cora entered the hall. With wide eyes and a pale pallor, she looked absolutely terrified, while Edward didn't seem at all surprised.

"Gentlemen," Edward said softly as Cora walked him back to his seat at the head of the table. "This is a day of celebration. Lay down yer arms."

“Yer Majesty,” Innes all but spat, “I would like to contest this wedding. Lady Cora Isles was promised to *me*.”

“Aye, but for six months, she was a prisoner right beneath yer very nose, Innes. Ye turned a blind eye to too many things,” Edward said in a hard voice. “Alec rescued her, and they’ve declared their love for each other. Given the horrors that Lady Cora has faced, I will not deny her this.”

“A love match?” Innes scoffed. “And you believe them?”

The room went strangely quiet as everyone understood that Innes had challenged the King. Immediately, he stepped away from Alec and turned to Edward and bowed his head. “Please accept my apologies. I mean no disrespect, Yer Majesty.”

“Ye believe this wedding to be a farce,” Edward mused. “Let me put yer mind at ease. I am leaving on the morrow, but I will leave a man behind. If there is any indication that their love is not true, then I will dissolve the marriage and uphold my original decree. Will that satisfy ye, Innes? I will not have a feud break out over this.”

Innes looked like he was going to explode, but he nodded. “Aye.”

“As a sign of yer support, ye will stay and congratulate the couple.”

Alec crossed the room to his bride. She had a death grip on Edward’s chair and stared at him with the terror of a child coming out of a nightmare. “Cora,” he said softly. When she didn’t immediately release her hold, he pried her hands loose and took them. They were freezing. “Come take yer seat by my side so Innes can offer his congratulations on behalf of the Campbell clan.”

All eyes were on them as they took their seats by Edward, but all Alec could see was the stiffness of her back.

When Innes came forward and took her hand, he brushed his lips across her skin. It was an accepted action, but when his lips lingered a little too long, Alec frowned.

“Twill be my greatest regret that I did not learn of the truth sooner,” Innes managed. “I wish ye and Alec great joy in yer marriage.”

Cora jerked her head up and down and snatched her hand away. "Thank you," she whispered.

Innes turned to Alec, and his eyes blazed with fury. "And to ye, Alec, I congratulate ye on behalf of the Campbell clan and offer ye our alliance. May it be as strong as when McKay blood ruled."

It was a barb, but Alec let it pass. He nodded.

"Wonderful," Edward declared. "Then let the festivities continue." With a wave of his hand, the music started up again, but the atmosphere was hardly the same as Innes and his men took their seats.

For the rest of the celebrations, his wife remained glued to her seat, and although Alec came and went, he kept a close eye on her. Finally, as dusk neared, Innes approached them. "We will take our leave," he said stiffly. "Thank ye for yer hospitality, and I offer my sincere apologies for arriving armed."

It was an act for the benefit of the King, and although Alec nodded his head, he knew that he and Innes both had an unspoken understanding. Whatever Innes was planning was far from over.

"I will escort ye out," he said as he stood. After he took a few steps, he realized that Innes hadn't fallen in step with him. Turning, he watched as Innes withdrew from Cora's side. He wore a wicked smile, and Cora just stared straight ahead and hadn't reacted to whatever he had told her.

Outside and out of Edward's earshot, Alec turned. "My wife and I will want some privacy. Send a messenger next time ye decide to cross my borders," he said in a hard tone. "Next week, I will travel to see yer brother."

"Do ye not wonder why naught but lies has fallen from the lips of yer wife?" Innes asked conversationally as he mounted his horse. "If I were ye, I would wonder what kind of woman I had married and whether I could trust her."

Despite wondering the same, fury surged through Alec. "Ye would do well to think before ye speak of my wife again," he hissed.

With a grin, Innes nodded his head. "I will give ye the privacy that ye

ask, and I look forward to seeing ye next week.”

He and his men turned and rode off, and when Alec turned, he saw Cora watching from the doorway. “Care to tell me what he said to ye?” Alec asked.

“Just words to share his displeasure,” Cora said quietly, and Alec’s gut tightened. For as often as his wife lied, he would have expected her to do a better job.

“Thank yer King and make yer excuses,” he ordered roughly. “Ye may retire to yer room.”

Bowing her head, she turned, and he blew out his breath. “My chambers, Cora. Ye may retire to my chambers.”

She hesitated for a moment before she hurried inside. Alec took a few more minutes outside to order a few men who were still sober to follow Innes and make sure they crossed the border. In the morning, he would reinforce the guards to make sure Innes kept his word and didn’t return.

When he returned, Cora was gone. “Yer Majesty—” he started as he greeted Edward.

The King cut him short with a frigid look. “She is the daughter of a man that I respected, admired, and loved,” Edward reminded him quietly. “And she has experienced nothing but pain and fear since she arrived in the keep that should have been her home. Ye will do to remember I can be a very unpleasant man. My man will be keeping an eye on her, so make sure that yer endgame doesna eat away at her soul.”

His words cut Alec to the quick, not because of the threat, but because they were true. His own paranoia aside, she was a woman ripped from her home and imprisoned.

And now she was his wife. He’d pledged to protect her, and that meant more than just her body. He would protect her spirit.

He would open this home to her and hope that she didn’t destroy it.

She was caught in the nightmare. Back in the prison, she listened as the water trickled along the stone walls and inflamed her own desperate desire to slake her thirst. Pulling at the chains, she tried desperately to reach the source only to stop when the doors opened and familiar voices reached her.

They were back. It was twice in one day. Surely they realized that she could not take much more. Her skin was parched and her body ached from when they last beat her.

Tears swam in her eyes as she moaned. No, no, no.

“Cora,” a new voice ordered. “Cora, wake up.”

Alec. She heard him even though she couldn’t see him. “Please, don’t let them do this. Don’t let them!”

“Cora! Cora!”

Wrenched from the nightmare, she came awake with a start and stared at the man whose arms were quickly enfolding her. “Doona fight me, lass,” he crooned as he pulled her into his embrace. “Breathe.”

Only then did she realize that her hands were digging into his shoulders, her nails almost drawing blood. Releasing her hold, she sucked in air and shuddered as the world righted itself.

It must have been late if she’d had enough time to fall asleep after the celebrations. She’d waited for Alec to return, to claim his marriage night, but he hadn’t.

“I fell asleep,” she said dully. “I did not mean to.”

“Tis alright. I just returned.” As she pushed against him, he released her. “What were ye dreaming?”

“I do not remember.” Another lie dropping from her lips. They weighed on her shoulders and threatened to bury her alive, but Innes’s last words had nearly unraveled her.

A reminder that all it took now for him to have her was Alec’s blood on his sword. He would threaten her family and her husband’s life to keep her in line, and she had no idea how to protect them.

To distract him, she reached for the buttons of her shift. “I will require some help,” she said as she turned to him.

His hands settled on hers. “Sleep tonight,” he said quietly. “I will not take from ye what ye are not ready to give.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “What if I am never ready?”

“Ye will be.” His voice was dipped in arrogance. “Of that, I am sure. Tonight, ye will sleep, and tomorrow, we will discuss yer new role as mistress of the keep.”

She didn’t want to sleep. She didn’t want the nightmares to claim her again. “We can discuss it now.”

With a chuckle, he threw back the blankets of the bed and slipped under. After a moment of hesitation, she followed suit. Although she’d already shared his bed once, tonight seemed different. More intimate, and when he pulled her close, her body seemed to naturally curve around him.

“I will wake ye should the horrors take ye again,” he assured her. “Close yer eyes and sleep. ‘Tis been a long day.”

“Alec,” she whispered. “I do not know if I can do this.”

“Pretend to be in love with me?”

His voice was a little harsh, and she winced. “No, I mean be your wife.”

“Twill not be hard. Just stay out of my way and doona cause any trouble.”

Alarmed, she sat up and stared at him. “What is it that you think a wife does?” she demanded.

“Ye will be a good mother to my children,” Alec sighed. “I would not have gone through with this if I did not believe that. Until then, ye may do as ye wish as long as it does not harm my job here.”

Thinking of the Thistles, of the love that bonded them, of the partnership that they had created, she realized with great sorrow that she would never have that with Alec.

Opening his eyes, Alec grunted and pulled her back down. “Go to sleep,” he ordered. “I am tired, Wife, and I doona wish to try and untangle the thoughts ye never want to voice.”

Slowly, she settled back down again and closed her eyes.

This time, when she slept, the nightmares didn’t come.



The next morning, Alec was gone from her bed. His bed. *Their* bed. She would have to remind herself of that. Slipping quietly from the chambers, she headed to her own to get dressed. Not having anything suitable for a mistress to wear and wanting the previous anonymity of her old life, she dressed in one of her serving dresses.

When she was younger, her mother had taught her the importance of clothes. A king could move through the crowd without notice so long as he discarded the royal robes and dressed in rags. Although just yesterday she’d married the laird, no one looked twice at her as she headed to the kitchens.

Breakfast was finished for the crowd, so her friends were seated around the small table and eating the last of the oatmeal. They did recognize her, and the kitchen went quiet.

“Good morning,” she said quietly. “I did not have a chance to speak to you before the wedding. I owe you an explanation.”

“Claire,” Mary said as she stood before she wrinkled her nose. “Sorry, Cora.”

"Lady Cora," someone reminded her snidely from the table.

Mary shot them a dirty look. "We knew ye had secrets, Cora. We didnae think it was anything like this, but we befriended ye, secrets and all. Now ye are our mistress..."

"Oh, please," Cora interrupted as she hurried forward and took Mary's hands. "I don't want to be your mistress. Truly, I don't. I would like us to be friends. Is that still possible?"

"We arena English, Cora," Mary laughed and hugged her. "A Scot's blood is a Scot's blood. I served for Laird Duncan. He was a good man, and I will be pleased to serve ye and be yer friend."

One look behind Mary told her that not everybody felt that way, but she would win them over. She may never have Alec's love, but she would have her friends.

"If Laird Alec sees ye wearing this, he wilnae be pleased," Mary said with a frown.

"Yesterday I was a servant and today I am a mistress. My wardrobe hasn't quite caught up," Cora said dryly as she walked to the counter and served herself a bowl of oatmeal. "Besides, things are moving a little too quickly for me. It's nice to have a moment to embrace my old life."

"Ye were not a servant for long," Mary said disapprovingly.

Cora shot her a wry look. "I imagine Alec will very much have a problem if I chain myself back into the dungeon."

"No, I meant that ye had a life in England. A family. Why did ye lie about that? Ye could have gone home. Does danger await ye there?"

Hating that she was lying to Mary, she studied her oatmeal. "I did not know the consequences of learning my true name, and I certainly did not want to wed Innes."

"Laird Alec is most certainly the better choice," Mary said with a wink and the table giggled. That immediately launched into a conversation about Alec's attributes, and no one thought to censor their words around Cora. Soon, she was so bright red that the table couldn't help

but rib on her about the night that she couldn't admit didn't happen.

"Well, some of us need to get to work," Mary said.

"I'll help," Cora said as she stood as well, and everyone stared at her.

"What?"

"Cora, I said that we can be friends, but I didnae say that ye could still be a servant. Ye canna start scrubbing floors again."

Her nightmares and fears about Innes still lingered with her, and she couldn't just walk around the keep listlessly. She needed something to do. "As your mistress, I don't believe you are allowed to tell me what I can and cannot do," she said with a sly smile.

Mary rolled her eyes. "Alec is going to regret marrying you."

“So. Ye think that because you married MacKay blood, that makes ye a MacKay?” Kane sneered as he brought his sword up.

Alec deflected it easy enough, but Kane and the rest of the MacKay men were learning. Stephen, Shane, and Jamie were obviously taking the time to teach them some skills, and it was showing.

“Would ye have Innes Campbell at the helm of this clan?” Alec asked as he thrust. It was because he trusted his men that he could move like this against a man he knew could be a great asset. If Kane couldn’t go on the defensive, he would find himself with a nasty wound, but he whirled and avoided injury.

When Kane didn’t bring his sword back up again, Alec frowned and halted. Pressing his lips together, Kane shook his head. “Nay,” he growled. “Nay, I would not work with a man like Innes. Seth...there was something evil about him, but he came from Duncan and we wanted to believe that he would mature into the man his father was. But Innes? There’s a dark hatred in that man’s heart.”

So the MacKays were not loyal to Innes. That was something at least. “Ye have much improved,” he acknowledged.

“Yer men have skills. They have been willing to teach when they are not chasing after our women.”

The others laughed, and Alec put down his sword and reached out his hand. Kane clasped it, and he knew that because of Cora, he was getting the approval of the MacKay clan. He hoped to keep that respect by proving to be the laird he knew he was capable of being.

Dripping with sweat from the training fields, Alec returned to the keep and ordered a bath drawn. His muscles were aching. He’d pushed

himself hard to try to drive the feel of Cora's body against his from his mind, but the guards on duty would suffice to make sure that the Campbells didn't cross the borders.

Alone in his chamber, he stripped and stepped into the tub. The warm water washed over him and felt relaxing, but his solace didn't last long. After just a few moments, the door opened, and the sweet bars of a humming melody reached him before Cora walked in.

Her eyes widened in shock, and she froze as they stared at each other. Languidly, he smiled before he noticed what she was wearing. "Come closer," he ordered.

"I..." A small tongue darted out as she wet her lips. "I don't think I should."

"Cora. Come here," he said again as anger swelled inside of him. She took a few steps forward and averted her eyes. When she was close enough, he reached out and grabbed her hands. Just like he suspected, her hands were pruned and wrinkled. "Dressed in serving rags and still doing servants' work. Ye are mistress of this keep!"

Quickly, she jerked her hands away. "I needed something to do, and I have nothing else to wear," she muttered. "I was just in here to collect the bedding."

"Ye will not!" Rising, water ran down his body, and he reached for a drying towel. With a squeak, Cora quickly turned away. "Cora, I told ye that I will not touch ye until ye are ready, but I am yer husband. Ye should look upon me."

"Dresses," she said hastily without turning around. "I need to see to getting some dresses. I'll speak to Mary. Excuse me."

Quickly, she scurried from the room, and he made no move to stop her.



By dinnertime, she must have rustled up some dresses and wore a blue that was far more fitting for the mistress of a keep. Her hair was pulled back, braided, and coiled at the nape of her neck. As he

escorted her into the great hall, he wrapped his hand around her waist and kept his touch light. Gaston, the man the King left behind, was watching them, his eyes piercing them with every move that he made, but he also knew that Cora would project every discomfort on her face.

If Alec pushed too hard, did something that she didn't like, it would be obvious. Thankfully, she didn't pull away and even smiled and nodded as he led her to her seat.

Pulling out her chair, he leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Relax," he murmured. "'Tis only dinner."

Rather than fear, there was irritation in her eyes as she looked up at him, and he smirked. There was the woman who'd stabbed a man to protect a friend. Who was willing to brave the rough terrain to escape.

"Married life suits ye, lass," Shane joked as he leaned over and took her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. "If ye find Alec not to yer taste, my bed is open to ye."

"Try it just once, and ye may discover that ye being headless will be to my taste," Alec countered mildly. He knew that Shane was just trying to get a rise out of him.

Cora just smiled at him. "The way that I hear it, you do not prefer your bed when you take a woman. The hay loft is more your speed."

Shane's mouth dropped open, and the table erupted in laughter. "Women talk, Shane, surely you know that," she teased.

"I do now," he muttered. "I doona suppose they told ye that they had a wonderful time?"

"If you were praised too often, then you would not want to improve."

The laughter increased, and even Shane had to grin.

Alec watched as his wife's shoulders eased just a little bit as she sat back in the chair. She was a little more relaxed, and he reached under the table to put a hand on her thigh. It was meant to be a comfort, but when her skin warmed under his touch and her cheeks began to pink, he started to have something else entirely in mind.

Keeping his touch easy, he moved his thumb back and forth, just teasing her and hoping that she remembered just a few nights ago when she was begging to touch him.

“Ye look like yer father,” Kane said as he studied her. “I doona know how I didnae see it before. I brought ye dinner once while ye were in the prisons. I should have known. Ye have my sincere apologies.”

Alec’s anger swelled. Just how many of the MacKay men saw Cora in those prisons and did nothing to release her? Did nothing to help her?

As if she knew what he was thinking, Cora grabbed his hand and squeezed it. “I cannot be mad at you, Kane, when I lied about my identity when I was freed. I do remember when you brought me dinner, and I remember that there was kindness when you freed me and helped me eat.”

“Did any of them lay a hand on ye?” Alec hissed. It hadn’t occurred to him that anyone other than Seth would have hurt her, but for all he knew, every man here could have laid hands on her.

“No. Only Seth.”

“Seth was not like his father,” Kane said in a low voice. “Yer father was a good man. I hear ye didnae get a chance to know him. For that, I am truly sorry.”

“Perhaps I can get to know him more by getting to know all of you.” Her voice shook just a little, and Alec realized that he was disgusted.

Disgusted with himself.

He didn’t trust her, but he had to admit to himself that she’d had one hell of a year. Taken from her family. Witnessed the murder of her father. Imprisoned and abused by her half-brother, and now married to a stranger.

And what had he done to make things easier for her? Not a damn thing.

After dinner, he held Cora’s hand as he walked her out of the room. When they were out of Gavin’s sight, she tugged her hand away and wrapped her arms around her body. “I think I might take a walk

before bed. I fear I ate too much.”

“Cora.” Before she could run from him, he reached down and snagged her hand. “Despite how our marriage came about, ye are my wife now. If ye tell me that ye are no longer hiding anything from me, then I will believe it.”

Raising her chin, she stared at him. Her beautiful green eyes were filled with anguish, and he mentally cursed himself. He’d wanted to put aside the animosity between them, but she was still keeping things from him. “What am I to do with ye?” he whispered.

“I do not keep anything from you that will harm you or your status here in the clan!” she cried out as she put her hands on his chest. “I was afraid after Seth and...and I did not know if I could trust you. I am sorry for that. I can see why you are angry with me, but I need you to know that what I keep from you now, I keep because I am just not ready to share with you. Not yet.”

“Your family? Cora, if ye wish to see yer family, I can make that happen.”

“No.” She shook her head. “No, it’s best if they continue to think that I am dead.”

“Why?” He couldn’t imagine letting his family think that he was dead. Connor, and even Grace, would go to the ends of the earth to discover the truth if there was any doubt. To him, family was everything.

“I can see what you’re thinking.” Letting her hands drop away, she turned from him. “The Thistles are not blood, and they need to look after their daughter first. She is entering her first season in London. It will go easier if there isn’t a scandal involved, and my history is fraught with scandal.”

“Then I am yer family now.” Yanking her up against him, he leaned down and brushed his lips across hers. There was an aching need inside of him to lift her skirts and see just he affected her, but he kept the kiss light and easy even though it threatened to drive him insane. “Ye will not keep things from me.”

“How can I tell you anything when you hate me?” Pulling away from

him, she shook her head. "When you do not trust me? We may be family in the eyes of the law, but you don't see me as a wife. Not really. You got what you wanted from me, Alec, and I will continue to play your games, but when the King's man is gone, I think maybe we should just leave each other alone."

He let her walk away, let her walk into her own chambers and close the door. But he wasn't done with her.

Not by a long shot.

Cora had just started working on the buttons of her dress when the door opened behind her. With a shriek, she whirled around, but it was only Alec, and there was a fire in her husband's eyes as he closed the door behind him. "This isnae yer room," he growled.

"I have not moved my clothes just yet." Her heart hammered against her chest as she stared at him. She'd said nothing untrue. In fact, she thought he would welcome the idea that she would not want to pursue a romantic relationship with him, but he looked infuriated.

"Ye doona make declarations and then storm away from me."

The fabric of her dress, not loosened, fell from her shoulder, and she pulled it back up. "If you want to have this conversation, then perhaps it can wait until after I'm dressed."

"Oh we are going to have a conversation, but I am not going to wait. Turn around," he hissed as he stalked toward her.

Thrusting her chin up, she considered telling him just where he could go, but she turned instead. As soon as his knuckles brushed against the bare skin revealed by her loose dress, she inhaled sharply. The man could anger and arouse her in a span of seconds, and she hated that. She hated that he had such power over her without even trying.

"I doona hate ye, Cora. I never have." The dress loosened even more as he slowly undid the rest of the buttons. "Distrusted, aye, but never hate. Since ye have been here, ye have been imprisoned, beaten, and threatened. That ends now that ye are my wife."

There was such tenderness in him that was at odds with the fury and power that she witnessed when she spied on his training sessions. Her heart fluttered, and she sucked in her lower lip as she turned to him.

"I am offering to leave you in peace. I would think that would make you happy."

Slowly, he tugged down her dress until it pooled at her feet. Her shift beneath was so thin that it offered no protection against his intense gaze, but she didn't bother to cover herself. Already, liquid heat pooled at her sex, and her chest was flushed with need.

"What would make me happy, dear wife, is if ye were naked and in my bed."

"This is my bed," she pointed out. Her voice was barely audible, but a wicked grin spread across Alec's face, and she knew that her husband had heard her.

"Works for me." Leaning down, he pressed his lips against hers, and there was nothing tender about it. Cora was eager for his kiss. Had been eager for it ever since the first time he'd kissed her, and when she opened for him, she tasted his need. For her.

It made her dizzy to know how much he wanted her. The things she remembered about her mother, the whispered secrets that echoed off the walls of her girls school and the stolen taboo writings in illicit novels couldn't have prepared her for this.

"Tell me that ye want this," Alec whispered as he moved his lips down her throat. Angling her head, she tried to give him as much access as possible. Grasping at his shirt, she bunched the fabric in her hands and wished there wasn't any barrier between her touch and his skin. She needed to know that he was running as hot as she was.

"Cora." Tugging her shift down, he exposed more of her cleavage and growled before he closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. "Cora, please."

"Yes. Yes." Releasing her hands from his shirt, she stroked her fingers through his hair and found the bold strength to kiss him, to run her tongue along the seams of his lips, and to moan. "Yes, I want this."

"Sweet, lass. Kiss me again. I like the taste of ye."

As her lips teased over him again, Alec took charge and pulled her up against him. The fabric rose with the action, and she wrapped her

bare thighs around his waist. There was an ache that couldn't be assuaged no matter how hard she tried, and she tried to press harder against him, feeling the hard edge of his erection. He gasped and walked them to the bed.

"Easy." The murmur swept over her skin and curled around her. "Slow down."

Slow down? She was going to burn up in his arms if he didn't do something. "Please. I need..." What did she need?

"I have ye, Cora. I wilnae let ye go. Tonight, ye are mine."

Yes, tonight, but what about tomorrow? When the sun rose, what would she be to him then?

As he softly placed her on the mattress, she reached for him again, but he pushed her arms above her head and stared down at her. "Do ye know how lovely ye are, Cora? Did ye have suitors in England? Men who did whatever it took to marry ye? To get ye into their bed?"

"No." No one looked at her the way that Alec looked at her. No one made her stomach flip, made her knees weak, made her skin tingle from just a brush of his fingers.

"Then the English are fools." Sitting back on his knees, he stared at her with such appreciation in his eyes as he slowly trailed a finger down between her breasts and along her abdomen. Her sex pulsed and quivered in anticipation for something she didn't quite understand, but she put all of her trust in him. "Do ye have any idea how much control 'tis taken for me not to touch ye before now?"

"I was ready. I have been ready. Please, Alec. Make me your wife."

"Aye," he breathed as he gathered the skirt of her shift. "Lift yer hips. I want to see yer body."

With warm cheeks, she did as he asked, and he slipped the thin material up and over her body. Now completely naked, she had to clutch the blankets beneath her to keep from covering herself. It wasn't just her nakedness. When Alec looked at her, she felt as if he could unravel everything inside of her until there was nothing left but the truth of how she felt about him.

He was her savior and her husband, but if she let herself fall in love, then she would have to feel the weight of her guilt for not trusting him. For still lying to him.

“Alec.” Wanting to shove that all away and just enjoy the moment, she reached for him. If she was naked, then she wanted him to be as well. “Alec, please!”

Wordlessly, his gaze never leaving hers, he stripped off his shirt before he leaned over her to taste her mouth again. The column of her neck. Her shoulders. Her nipples.

Gasping, she arched under him as pleasure danced inside of her. His continued moving down her body, and when he kneeled between her legs, her eyes widened and she pushed herself up. “What are you doing?”

“Making you ready for me, sweet. Just relax and enjoy.”

Relax? How could she relax when those wicked lips and tongue were teasing along her most private center? When they slipped over her sensitive nub, she jack-knifed up and gasped, but there was nowhere to escape the pleasure. Using every bit of his strength and power, he held her down and continue to pleasure her until she didn’t recognize herself as she writhed and moaned.

Then it hit her. An explosion that rocked her body and left her helpless and shuddering. Releasing her, Alec eased off the bed and removed his trousers, and when he returned, he spread every delicious inch of his naked body along next to her.

“Ye are going to do that again when I’m inside of ye,” he whispered sensuously as his hands traced up and down her arms while she continued to glow from her orgasm. She had no idea her own body could do that, and she couldn’t imagine doing it again. “And I am going to feel yer pleasure, Cora.”

He kissed her, hard and hot, while his hands stroked her and brought her alive. Bolder now, she reached for him to explore. He was so hard, all muscle and power, and so hot beneath her fingers. Listening to his breathing, learning what he liked, she fluttered her fingers over him until she found courage and grasped his hard length and squeezed.

Hissing, he jerked out from her touch. "Sorry," she muttered as she clenched her fist. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Hurt me? Cora, ye slay me. I want this to be good, but I wilnae last if ye touch me like that." With another kiss, he moved between her legs and reached between them. She was wet and aching for him again. "My wife. Mine."

Then he slid into her, and she had to bury her face into his shoulders to keep from screaming. After a few strokes, he was inside of her, and she was clawing at his back.

"Easy," he whispered. "Cora, I doona want to hurt ye. Ye must give yourself a chance to adjust."

Adjust? She didn't want to adjust. She wanted everything that he was able to give her, and she ignored his pleas and moved under him restlessly until he grunted and started to move. Slow and easy strokes until there was nothing but him, and for the first time since she'd entered Scotland, she understood the power of the highlander. Not just the brute strength, but the control and depths of their love.

And when she found her release, she cried out his name and held him until he spilled his seed and returned her embrace.

Addicted to the way Cora felt at night, he made sure that she was in his arms every night and the moments that he could steal during the day, but even inside her, he could tell that she was holding back.

So he focused his energy elsewhere. Training. Hunting. Learning more about his new clan. It made it easier to deal with the fact that his wife was holding back on him, even in bed when they were alone.

Three weeks had passed since the King had departed, and he could feel the suspicious eyes of Gaston almost everywhere he went, so when the King's man cornered him one evening after dinner, he wasn't surprised.

"Alec," Gaston said in that nasally voice of his. "I cannot help but notice that ye havna been spending much time with yer wife."

"I have been busy," Alec said coldly as he eyed the man distastefully. He didn't understand the reason for King Edward actually leaving someone here. They all knew that he and Cora were not a love match.

"Still, I believe that Innes Campbell is returning soon, and the King must be able to back his word." He looked uneasy and took a deep breath. "May I suggest that ye take yer lovely wife on a picnic today so that the clan will have something to speak about when Innes does return? I have already had the cook pack something lovely for ye."

A picnic? Alec groaned. He had too many things to do to play the happy husband, but he nodded. "Verra well. Please make sure my wife is ready within the hour."

"Aye, Laird. I am sure that ye will have a lovely time."

A lovely time. Just what was Gaston and the King up to?

Annoyed at having to adjust his duties, he met up with his men. “I have something that I need to take care of,” he told Stephen stiffly. “I trust that ye will be able to run the training session without me?”

His friend raised an eyebrow. “I can. What are ye going to do?”

Looking around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping, he scowled. “Apparently I have to woo my wife so the clan will have something to boast about when Innes comes to visit.”

The men hooted around him and whistled. “Woo yer wife! As if ye have any idea how to do that,” Jamie joked.

“Mind yer tongue,” Alec growled as he shot him a dirty look. “I know how to woo women.”

“Ye know how to bed women, but woo them? ’Tis something entirely different. If ye didnae have a problem with that, then ye would not have to put on a front. The clan would already have something to talk about.”

His friends weren’t wrong, Alec realized. Before he’d married her, Cora had a certain look in her eyes when she watched him. Now she was more guarded than ever. It was a step backward.

Not that he wanted his wife to be in love with him. It was easier when they both understood just what this marriage was—a political step—but there was enough passion between them that they should be able to spend their days with each other instead of avoiding each other.

And he missed that sweet smile she used to give him.

“There will be no more talk of my wife,” he said finally as he stomped away. By the time he reached the stables, Cora was already there and stroking the muzzle of an older stallion while she whispered in his ear. Struck for a moment by the sight, he wondered just what stories she was telling the horse.

“Ready?”

At his stiff tone, she lowered her arm and turned to him. “Yes,” she said politely. “I am.”

Knowing that the groom and the stable boys would be nearby, he

forced himself to relax as he gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek before he lifted her into the saddle and adjusted her skirts over her legs. The last time they were in the stables together, she was trying to run away.

Trying to run from him.

Now she was his.

"I know you have been busy," she said a little too loudly as she looked around furtively. "I appreciate you taking the time to spend with me."

She was a good liar but a terrible actress. Stifling a chuckle, he mounted his own horse, packed with their picnic, and led them away from the populated lands and into the wilds. Despite his annoyance, he felt himself relax. It was nice to take some time for himself.

And his wife.

"It's beautiful here," Cora said, breaking the silence between them. "The Thistles have a place in the country that we go most summers, but it still isn't quite like this."

She didn't mention her family often, and Alec kept quiet hoping that she would continue. It still boggled his mind that she didn't want her family to know that she was alive.

"There was a large hill near the cottage, and Lana and I would roll down it until we nearly made ourselves sick. Her mother would get so angry because we stained and ripped dresses, but she never stopped us even when she knew we were headed to the top of the hill. I loved my mother very much, but I didn't have that kind of childhood, and it was wonderful to share something so innocent with the woman who had become my sister."

"Connor and I had a similar tradition," Alec said lightly. "Although instead of rolling down the hill, we'd push our sister Grace down. There was a small pond at the bottom, and we would wager whether or not she'd be able to stop herself before she got wet."

Cora giggled. "Oh, your poor sister!"

"Poor nothing! She would deliberately pick thorns and burrs in the

meadows and then hide them in our beds. She was a hellion. Still is. The best thing about coming here is that I no longer have to deal with her.” He received a letter from them only a couple of days ago congratulating him on his marriage and then chastising him for not waiting so they could join.

She looked over at him and bit her lower lip. “You have not mentioned introducing me to them. Is it because I am English?”

Her feelings were hurt. How did he not see that? She’d lost her family, and he didn’t even have the decency to offer her his?

“Nay. I believe my family will like ye quite a bit. Connor is dealing with a rising feud on his lands or he would have traveled here already.” Stopping at a clearing of the bluffs, he looked over at the beautiful view in front of them. “How about here?”

“This is lovely.” Before he could get to her, she hopped down nimbly from her stallion and landed gracefully.

“Ye are supposed to let yer husband do that,” he grumbled as he followed suit and opened the packs.

“Honestly, Alec, there is no one here but us. There is no need to continue the pretense.” Grabbing the blanket from him, she spread it out.

A knot formed in his stomach. “What do ye mean by that?”

“I have decided that I am comfortable with what we have,” she said simply as she sat down and smiled at him. “You will never come to love me, but we are compatible. You do not seem angry with me that we are married, and I appreciate that. Things could be far more difficult. I think this is an excellent opportunity for us to discuss how we progress.”

“Progress?” he asked hollowly.

“Set certain ground rules in regards to other people.”

What the devil was she talking about?

“I am not a fool. I know how men are, even in marriage, so I believe it will be better if we are honest with each other. Women have been

looking at you. I have noticed, and I do not want you to come to hate me for tying you down when you might want to be with another.”

Rage swept over him, but he tempered it as he opened a cloth of cheese and biscuits and placed it in front of them. “Yer father strayed in his marriage and it resulted in ye.”

Cora nodded impassively. “Yes.”

“And ye have seen firsthand from yer mother that yer father is not the only one.”

“Alec, you do not need to justify my conclusions. I am simply attempting to open up an honest dialogue here.”

An honest dialogue. When she was the one who lied about her name and her family. When she still seemed to keep secrets.

“Is there someone here who has caught yer attention?”

“What?”

“Ye seem to be giving me permission to break the vows that I made to ye, so I cannae help but wonder if ye are simply trying to excuse yer own actions.”

Her eyes chilled just a little as she straightened. “You are not about to imply that I have my eyes on Innes Campbell again, are you?”

“Ye brought his name up.”

Her pain was written all over her face as she stood. “This was a mistake. I should go.”

“Cora.”

Ignoring him, she walked to the horses. “Do not worry. I won’t return to the keep right away. I will take my time so everyone believes we enjoyed ourselves.”

“Ye are not leaving.” Jumping to his feet, he reached out and took her hand. “Ye were the one who started this conversation.”

“Because I cannot figure you out! I have no idea what you want from me! You look at me and you touch me at night as if you adore me, but

in the morning, you are never there. During the day, you avoid me, and when we are together at dinner, everything is an act. I fear the day that you look at me with resentment and hatred.”

“And ye are willing to share me to avoid that?” he hissed. “I wilnae share ye, Cora. I wilnae have ye looking at other men or wishing ye are with them when I am in yer bed. Do ye understand me?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You thought I was with Innes before our marriage bed.”

“And I was wrong. Ye were innocent. I should never have said that.” His grip tightened just a little. “Doona cry, Cora.”

“I don’t want to share you either.”

“I have noticed no women looking at me. I had no plans to marry, and I doona regret that I didnae marry for love. When I am with ye”—he swallowed hard—“there is no one else, Cora. No other woman.”

She opened her mouth, but he heard the familiar twang of string vibrating. He pulled her to the ground and covered her just as the arrow grazed his arm. He didn’t even register the pain as another arrow embedded into the tree trunk next to them.

“Stay down,” he growled as he pulled her up against him and dragged her behind the tree. “You stay here, and you do not get up until I return.”

Her eyes rounded. “Alec, you are bleeding.”

“Stay here!”

Keeping low, he darted behind the next tree and glanced around. Someone had just tried to kill his wife, and he wasn’t about to let that stand.

Shock kept Cora where she was until she looked down at her hands. They were covered in blood from Alec's wound, and her stomach twisted. What if he didn't return? What if whoever shot those arrows attacked him and he was too weak from blood loss to defend himself?

She couldn't lose him.

Taking a deep breath, she scrambled to her feet and tried to follow behind him. There was an eerie silence in the wood. No sounds of an attacker and nothing from Alec. Even the birds weren't singing, but maybe the sound of her own heart pounding was drowning everything out.

What if he was already dead?

Trying to hold back her sobs, she kept moving forward as she searched for him. Finally, when she couldn't take it anymore, she called out his name. Softly at first until the panic overtook her.

"Cora!"

It was an angry growl as she neared a grouping of bushes, and she nearly wept with relief when he stepped out. "I told ye to stay put!"

"I thought something had happened to you. Oh, we have to get you back. You're still bleeding." Maybe it was adrenaline, but she found the strength to rip her skirts and wrap his wound. "You can send someone out for the archer later."

"He's long gone." Alec's eyes blazed with anger as he looked around. "Aye, we need to get ye back, and then ye arena going anywhere without a guard."

“You think the arrow was meant for me?” Twisting the fabric, she knotted it tightly.

“I promised to protect ye. I wilnae let anything happen to ye.”

Forcing a smile, she nodded. “Come. We need to see the healer.”

There was a flurry of activity when they returned. Alec, a little weak, still managed to bark out orders before she could convince him to see the healer. Even then, he was still ordering patrols throughout the forest.

Afterward, when he was supposed to be resting, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood. “Alec, what are you doing? Please,” she pleaded.

Her husband ignored her. “Kane?” he asked Jamie. “Do ye think that he was capable of something like this?”

“No.” Jamie shook his head emphatically. “He may not have liked ye in the beginning, but he respects ye now. I think he realizes that he would not be ready to take over, and he respects Duncan’s line. He wouldna do anything to hurt Cora.”

“Jamie, surely this can wait until morning,” Cora tried again.

“Someone else, then. I have not won over all of the MacKays just yet.”

Jamie shook his head. “There might be some discontent among them, but no one hates ye enough to go after Cora.”

“Stop!” Cora shouted as she jumped up. “Am I invisible here or am I mistress of this keep? Jamie, leave us. You can return in two hours.”

Both men gaped at her, and she took a deep breath and pointed to the bed. “You will lay back down or I will tie you down. I am asking for nothing more than two hours for you to rest and ensure that the wound is not worse than we think. Please.”

“Cora,” Alec started.

“Jamie, could you please get me some rope,” she interrupted pleasantly, “and perhaps a couple of men to help me? Even wounded, I think he could overpower me.”

Jamie grinned. "I think we could do that."

"Enough," Alec growled. "Look, I am getting in the bed. Two hours though, and then I will make a statement at dinner. Jamie, leave us."

Unable to breathe easy until Alec was in the bed, she waited until Jamie was gone and hurriedly closed the door behind him. When her husband was settled in the bed, she nearly lost it as she checked the bandage on his arm. "You are still bleeding, so I will need to change this soon, and we will have to monitor you for fever. Your healer is excellent. I could not have sewn you up better myself."

"Cora." His voice was soft and caressed her, and she couldn't stop the tears from rolling down her face. Nestled against the pillows, he reached out and pulled her against him. "Doona cry, my sweet. I wilnae let anyone hurt ye."

Hurt *her*. He didn't even seem to fathom the idea that this might be because of her. "Alec," she whispered. "Alec, I don't think the person was trying to kill me."

"Ye are right. I could have been the target," he acknowledged. "But 'tis more likely ye. Take ye out, and I lose my hold on the clan. Someone like Innes could claim it without having to murder a laird."

She wanted to tell him the truth. She needed to tell him. Innes didn't just want the MacKay clan. He wanted her, and he was not above murdering to get to her. If he killed Alec, then he would be free to marry her.

But Lana. God help her, but what would Innes do to Lana? How could Alec protect her? She was too far away. Too vulnerable, and Innes already had people watching her. Ready to take her away at a moment's notice.

"Promise me that you will be careful. I don't want anything to happen to you," she whispered as she laid her head down on his chest. "You are more to me than the man I was being forced to marry. Do you understand?"

Stroking her hair, he hushed her. "I am here, Cora. I am not going to leave ye."

No, he was not, and she was not going to let Innes take him away from her. Maybe it was time to see just how much highlander was in her blood.



Because he suspected that she would somehow know, Alec waited in bed for two hours even though she was asleep before he slipped out. It had shaken him. Not just the arrows but the fact that she had been so terrified for him.

Him. She'd done nothing but try to escape him, but she'd gone after him because she was scared. She could have walked right into the path of a killer, but she didn't want to lose him.

He couldn't let this happen again.

The dining hall was packed more than usual that night. Some, he suspected, wanted to see if he would show up, but others were waiting for his orders. There was nothing but respect in that hall. Cora belonged to them now, and they recognized that. They would protect her.

Silence fell as he walked in. Taking his spot at the head of the table, he waited a beat before he grinned. "Sorry to break it to ye, but ye cannae get rid of me that easily."

Laughter rippled through the hall. "As many of ye heard, there was an attack today. Whether that attack was against me or my wife remains to be seen, but I trust that everyone here will do their part to protect yer mistress."

Kane stood and nodded his head. "She is the daughter of Duncan. We will give our lives for her, and for ye, our laird."

It was the first time that Kane had publicly acknowledged his fealty. Slowly, the MacKay men stood and all bowed their heads, each echoing his sentiments.

Cora may have felt like she no longer had her English family, but she had a Scottish one. He wished she was here for this, to see that she was loved.

“If Innes Campbell is behind this, then I want proof. From here forward, Innes Campbell isnae an ally. He is the enemy.”

“And if he is not?” someone asked.

Alec leveled his gaze. “Then it is one of ye.”

Cora's hands shook as she sealed the letter and handed it to Mary. Alec had her watched like a hawk now, and there was no way that she could leave the keep, but Mary could still come and go, and she knew that Mary wouldn't tell on her. "I don't want you going to Campbell on your own. You're too pretty," Cora said with a brave smile. "Hire a messenger from one of the villages."

It was the next day, and Cora had barely slept. Her nightmares were no longer about being in the prison. It was about finding Alec's body at the hands of Innes.

"Ye should tell Alec the truth," Mary whispered.

Cora's heart broke. "If I tell Alec, my sister will die. If I do nothing, then Alec will die. I cannot choose between my husband and my sister. I won't."

"And ye think that ye can reason with a man like Innes?"

Reaching out, she clasped Mary's hands in hers. "I will do what it takes to protect the people that I love. Please do this for me, Mary. I just need to know what he wants. It's just a conversation."

Mary nodded. "All right. So long as 'tis just messages. Ye wilnae go see him."

"I cannot even leave my chambers without being watched. How am I going to leave the keep?"

"True enough." Mary grinned wolfishly. "Say what ye want about yer man, but he knows how to protect his woman."

His woman. Cora warmed at that. She hoped that maybe Alec felt the same.

Although she expected nothing different, she was still disappointed when, an hour later, Alec returned with blood soaking his bandage. It would be wasting her breath to tell him to take it easy. At least he had come to her rather than letting it continue to bleed.

“The healer is better at suturing than me,” she told him as she sewed the wound closed. It didn’t look swollen, so that was a good sign. Just a little bruised.

“I doona want her to tend to me,” Alec said as he stared at her. “I want ye.”

“You don’t need to be wounded to see me,” she teased as she rewrapped the bandage and knotted it. “I am your wife. It is permissible to simply visit me.”

“Ye are angry about the guards.”

She walked to the washbasin and cleaned her hands. “No, I understand the need for them, but I am not used to being watched.”

“Harder to be sneaky that way.”

Her stomach flipped, but when she glanced over to him, there was an easy smile on his handsome face. They’d faced a harrowing experience, and he seemed at ease with it. Playful even.

It was disconcerting.

“How would you like it if I had women watching you to make sure that you didn’t reopen your wound?” she retaliated.

“Annoyed. Luckily, ye cannae do that.” Rising from the chair, he tugged at the bandage and grunted in approval. “Ye do good work.”

“Then take care of my good work.”

Leaning down, Alec planted a kiss on her forehead. “My brother has heard of the incident. He is coming to visit. He should be here by tomorrow. I am certain that Gaston will have messaged the King as well, but I doona think that he will make another visit.”

“It will be nice to meet your brother. I promise to play the loving wife.”

To her surprise, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "For a moment, I thought that someone might kill ye. I didnae like feeling that way, Cora."

"Are you blaming me?"

"No. I am just telling you how I feel. I may miss dinner this evening, so I am arranging for a late and private dinner with ye."

"I will plan accordingly."

As he walked away she realized, startled, that this wasn't a ploy. No one would be watching them have an intimate dinner. Maybe he did want to spend time with her.

More than anything, she hoped that Innes would realize the error of his ways and stop.

Just because she wasn't joining the clan dinner tonight didn't mean that she wasn't supposed to look after it. Heading to the kitchens, she approached Louisa. The large woman glared at her. "I know what ye and Mary are doing, and I doona like it one bit."

"It's just a message," she insisted as she glanced around. "And not so loud. Alec will be furious if he finds out."

"For good reason. Ye of all people should know what kind of man Innes Campbell is. He isnae going to negotiate with ye. He isnae going to stop until he gets what he wants. Ye want my advice? Tell Alec so yer husband can put a sword through the man's belly."

"Louisa!" Inhaling sharply, Cora shook her head. "You know what will happen if Alec kills Innes. His brother will retaliate, and there will be a bloody feud. There has to be another way, and I am going to find it."

"Ye are hoping that Innes wants money? Ye doona have any money."

First she needed to know what Innes would settle for. Then she would figure out the answer. "Haven't you heard?" she teased lightly. "I am a thief. I am told that Laird Sinclair will be here in a couple of days with some men. How does our food storages look?"

"I see no reason that we cannae handle a few extra guests although we will need to share with one of the outlying villages. I got a message

today that some of the crops are failing. The laird is looking into it tonight.”

“How often does that happen?”

Lousia shrugged. “Occasionally, but ’tis awfully wet for a brush fire.”

Cora’s head snapped up. “A brush fire? In multiple fields?”

“Aye.”

Cora’s stomach clenched. It was far too wet for an accidental brush fire. “I will speak with Alec tonight. I will coordinate with you in the morning on solutions.”

First Alec was targeted and now one of the villages. Innes wanted the clan, and he didn’t care who suffered.



Alec’s arm ached, but the fury of seeing the barren fields overrode any pain. The little boy in front of him looked almost terrified. “’Tis alright,” Alec assured him as he knelt down in front of him. “This isnae yer fault. Just tell me what ye saw.”

“I was playing on the hill up there. My dada gave me a wood sword and told me if I got good ‘nuff, I could be part of yer guard. I am not good ‘nuff yet.”

Tousling the boy’s hair, he grinned. “Ye have some time to practice. Maybe I can have some of my men to work with ye. See what ye are made of.”

The fear disappeared, and the boy’s eyes brightened. “Aye?”

“Aye. So what happened while ye were practicing?”

“I saw three men in the fields. I thought they were working, but then I saw the flames. They didn’t shout an alarm or anything, so I ran to my dada to tell him. They were gone when we got there. My dada said brush fires happened, but I saw the men! I did!”

“I believe ye. Can ye tell me anything about the men?”

The boy shook his head solemnly. "Nay. I was too far away."

"'Tis alright. Ye did well. Go to yer father now." When the boy ran off, Alec straightened and clenched his jaw. If the boy was right, this happened just shortly after he and Cora had been attacked. It was almost as if someone knew they had failed and headed to the closest village to exact their revenge.

He didn't have enough trained men to patrol all of the MacKay villages. Any one of them could be a target, and then it would seem like he couldn't protect his people.

"Kane, I heard rumors that some of the original guard members left when Seth took over for his father. Do ye know roughly how many?"

"I would say about two dozen."

"Do ye know where they are now?"

"Several took refuge on McNab's lands. They may know the rest."

"Less than a day's ride?"

Kane nodded. "I can leave in the morn and be back in two days' time."

"Good. See how many ye can bring back. We are going to need all the men that we can get."

"Ye should speak to Mary, Cora's friend. Her brother was one of the ones that was forced off the land when he tried to stand up to Seth."

Alec nodded. "Jamie?"

"I will stay here tonight although I doona expect any more trouble. 'Tis likely that whoever did this will target another village."

"Just to be safe." There were fewer than fifty people in this village, and most were too young or too old to fight off an attack. Alec didn't want to take any chances. "I am posting men at the surrounding villages, so I cannae leave anyone with ye."

"'Tis alright."

That was Jamie. Loyal to the very bone. This was not supposed to be a long assignment for them. They missed their families, but they would

stay forever if Alec asked it of them.

“I could stay.”

“Nay,” Jamie growled. “Ye need to be seen at the keep, coordinating duties. Besides, Cora is a force to be reckoned with when she is angry.”

Aye. His wife was gaining boldness and power by the day. But Alec didn’t hate it.

After giving orders, he turned and headed back to the keep. Despite everything, he was looking forward to spending a night with his wife.

With little to do to keep her mind off Campbell and Alec and her family in England, Cora threw herself into her work. She knew that Alec didn't approve of her scrubbing the floors and washing the clothes, but today was not the day for her to be flitting about like a useless chit. Since there were no events to coordinate and the household ran seamlessly, Cora quietly helped the servants out.

Although she returned to her chambers in time to dress before dinner so Alec would be none the wiser, she found him inside and waiting for her.

"Must I find another mistress for the keep?" He sighed as he lounged on the bed.

"Too late. I have already spread word that you are a terrible husband, so no one will have you now." She went over to him and tugged at his shirt. "Off. Let me see your arm."

A cheeky grin spread over his face, and he shrugged out of his shirt. "If ye want me naked, all ye have to do is ask."

"Now is not the time to seduce. You could be bleeding through your bandage. How would that look at dinner?" she fussed. Thankfully, there was no blood, so whatever he did today, at least he didn't harm his sutures. "I will help you bathe tonight so you don't get them wet. Just let me change for dinner, and we can go down."

"Actually, we're having dinner here, and I've already given the orders for a bath to be set up in my room. Why havna ye moved yer wardrobe into my chambers?"

"You spend so much time here that I thought they were both your chambers," she said lightly even as her stomach fluttered. She still

wasn't entirely sure where she and Alec stood, but it was a good sign if he wanted all of her things in his room.

Wasn't it?

"Tomorrow make that yer priority."

Cora nodded curtly and tried not to think about the fact that any day now, Innes might send a letter back telling her that there are no negotiations. He wanted her, and he'd be willing to go through Alec to get to her.

"Cora." Alec was impossibly fast, even injured, and she didn't even realize that he was out of the chair until his hand was gently grasping her elbow. "Look at me. What is wrong? Are ye worried that I cannae keep ye safe?"

He still believed that she was in danger. "No, it's nothing like that. I'm just worried about everything."

"I wilnae let anything happen to ye. I swear it," he growled before he pulled her close. Gasping, her mouth was already open when he kissed her. Hot and urgent, it took her by surprise. She had no defenses against him when he was like this, and she melted against him. Her hands had just started to roam the ripple of muscles along his hard abdomen when there was a knock at the door.

"I have the dinner that ye requested, Laird Alec," one of the serving girls said on the other side.

"Damnation, but they have terrible timing," Alec growled against her lips before he kissed her again and released her. Stumbling back, she touched her lips as he opened the door to take the tray. "Jamie will make our excuses at dinner tonight. Hopefully Gaston will be satisfied that I'm romancing my wife."

At that, her heart plummeted. Of course. It was all just an act. She needed to remember that. Even if her feelings were growing for him, his were not.

Pulling herself back together, she busied herself with pulling two chairs up to the table while he poured two glasses of wine. The makeshift dinner table made, she sat down and forced a smile. "So tell

me about the brush fires.”

“A child saw a few people just before the fires started, but he cannae say who they were or if they started the fires. ‘Tis a small village, so it could have been any of our patrols checking in or it could be arson. We need more guards,” he sighed as he buttered his roll.

“Can you ask your brother for some?”

“He has offered, but the Sinclairs have enemies as well, and I already took some of our best men with me. I must stand on my own. I know quite a few men left when Seth took over. I have tasked Kane with tracking them down.”

Cora brightened. Finally, something that she could do. “Mary’s brother is one of them. I’ll talk to her about getting in touch with him. I am sure they would want to work under you.”

“Ye have so much faith in me.”

Yes, she did. She believed in what he was doing here. She believed in his strength and leadership and his big heart.

Bloody hell, I am falling in love with my husband. It is getting a little embarrassing!

“I am your wife. I want to support you,” she said as she grabbed her wine and drank deeply from the cup.

“And apparently it makes ye thirsty.” He watched her with a chuckle. “I have been thinking about what ye said yesterday.”

When his voice lowered like that, all logic she had fled. She was certain she said quite a bit yesterday but she couldn’t quite fathom what he wanted to discuss.

“About our progression.”

Oh. She swallowed hard. “Yes. We maintain some civility, and...”

“Cora, I beg of ye not to finish that sentence,” he said. “I wilnae share ye, and I doona want anyone else. If ye want to talk about where we go from here, then ye need to understand that.”

A little relief swept through her. That was something at least. “I do

not want anyone else, Alec. Only you.”

“Good. So then when we talk about progress, when we talk about the future, we talk about us. Together.”

Does he love me? She searched his face, those intense eyes, and wondered if there was maybe a spark of something for her, something that ran deeper than lust to win and lust for her.

“Together,” she agreed. Then she looked down at her plate. “Dinner looks delicious.”

“To hell with dinner,” he growled and pushed back his chair. Before she could ask him what he was doing, he’d pulled her up and sat her on the table, sending plates full of food and goblets full of wine crashing to the floor.

Want seared her, and she didn’t even mind or care of the mess that they were making. His heat, his need, surrounded her, and he gently tugged her braid, forcing her head back as he claimed her lips.

Hungry for his taste, she opened to him, drew in his tongue, accepted every stroke. Careful of his wound, she tugged at his shirt, wanting to feel his skin under her fingers.

“Ye want me, sweetheart?” he whispered as he let her open his shirt. His hands were busy pushing up the skirts of her dress, sliding over her sensitive thighs, coaxing out another moan.

“Always.” She always wanted him. In her arms. In her bed. By her side. Always. She missed him when he was gone, and she loved it when she saw him again.

His fingers found her wetness, and he stroked. “Ye can have me. Whenever ye want.” Withdrawing his fingers, much to her dismay, he gripped her ankles and pulled her to the edge of the table before he stepped between her legs.

She reached for the button of his trousers.

“Kilts,” she whispered as she fought with his buttons. “You really must wear kilts more often. All the time. With nothing underneath. That would make this much easier.”

“I will keep that in mind,” he laughed. Then he was free, warm, and pulsing in her hand.

The next thing she knew, he was inside her, and there was nothing else to say. She clutched at him, let him fill and stretch her, and the pleasure between them swept her away.

It was hours before they got back to what dinner remained on the table, and by then they were starving and didn't care that it was cold or scattered across the table. There was something wild about eating dinner naked with his wife.

After he'd satisfied her several times.

"I'd offer to snag something hot from the kitchens, but I can't stand the idea of putting on clothes," Cora admitted as she snagged some cheese that was teetering on the edge of the plate. Breaking it in half, she offered it to him, and he nibbled on it straight from her fingers.

"Oh, if you keep doing that, we won't be eating for long," she said huskily.

Yes. This was a moment for him, and he savored it. Not that she wanted him, but that she was feeling more comfortable with him. More comfortable with how she felt about him.

They could be more. Now that he could put his suspicions aside, see her as his wife, he could see just how they could be. How their life could be.

Happiness. Security. He could see them with their bairns in their arms now, then later, chasing the ruffians around, while they both protected them and loved them.

She'd seen so much darkness, and he hadn't helped, but now, he only wanted her in warmth and love. If he couldn't give it to her, then he would help give her a whole family that would love her.

Except, why couldn't he? He'd been raised in a loving family. When he was with Cora, he thought of nothing else and no one else. When he

was away from her, she was never far from his mind.

“You’re staring,” she murmured. “Are you disgusted to learn that I am starving when you are finished ravishing me?”

“Ye should have told me sooner. Now all I can think about is how ye must have suffered before. Trapped in bed with me. No food.”

“Aye,” she said mocking his Scottish brogue with a sparkle in her eyes. “Suffered. Endlessly.”

“Sassenach wench.” With a growl, he snuck an arm around her waist and hauled her into his lap. The chair teetered, and he rocked forward to put it back on all four legs while she squealed.

“Hey! No more ravishing until I’ve had more food,” she protested.

“No ravishing.” He nuzzled her neck. “Just holding ye.” And relishing it. He’d come to enjoy his nights with her just so he could hold her while she slept. In his arms, she was warm and supple.

And safe.

“All right, but you need to eat too.” She held up a piece of cold chicken which he nibbled from her fingers and greedily licked her skin. Her smile lit up her whole face.

Cora was so beautiful. The men in England who’d looked at her and not seen her for the treasure that she was were idiots. Then again, she was a handful.

His handful.

The recent changes in her were unexpected. She’d fought him every step, even after their marriage, but now she suddenly wanted to try and make it work. Make *them* work.

He wanted this to work too, not just for his position in the clan, but because of her. Because she was his family now.

Curving his hand around her thigh, he kissed her neck. Already, his erection was hardening again. “I think one of us may have to go to the kitchens after all.”

“Why is that?”

Spinning her around so that she straddled him with her back pressed against his chest. Without saying a word, he reached between her naked legs and felt her wetness.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Yes. I think that might be a good idea.”

They didn’t drift off to sleep until close to dawn.



“Ye look awful,” Jamie snickered the next morning as they rode along the border.

Alec might have looked a bit rough with little sleep, but he was feeling just fine. “Any luck on tracing the owners of the arrows or finding evidence of Cora’s attacker?”

“Or yers?” Stephen pointed out. “Ye are the more likely target since Cora wields no power. Take ye out, and Innes can have the clan.”

It was true that Alec made an easier target. He was out more, and even though he was with his guards, he was more open to an attack from Innes. He had more warriors, resources, and allies. Cora rarely left the keep.

“I doona want myself dead either,” Alec pointed out.

“The arrows had no markings or paints on them. Also, thankful, no poisons, and we found nothing in the woods,” Jamie said as his face fell. “We need to rethink yer protection.”

“We are stretched too thin as it is. Reports from the outlying villages?” Even as he relieved the border guards, they looked drawn and wary. He needed more guards if he wanted to keep his clan safe. He needed to find those that had fled Seth’s nightmare reign and hope that they had not pledged fealty to another.

“There were no disturbances, however, a few men did report a young boy racing through the lands last night. He had a letter with him, but he would not say who it was from. Only who it was for.”

“And?” Alec asked.

“’Twas for Mary, the serving girl.”

“Must be her brother. Cora had said that she would get in touch with her about him returning, but that was sooner than I expected. Much sooner. Perhaps her brother has been in touch with her all this time. I will find out where he is. Anything else?”

Jamie and Stephen shook their heads. “All right. Connor and Grace will be here this afternoon. About Grace...”

“Doona worry,” Stephen chuckled. “We wilnae let her charm her way into mischief. We know how she is.”

A hellion is what she was. Grace could charm just about anyone with a pretty smile and a few words, and that made her impossible to handle. If there was trouble to be had, Grace could find it, and because she was the sister of a powerful ally of the King, it made her a target as well.

Alec gave the new border regiment their orders and rotated the guards patrolling the outer villages. When he got the message that his brother and sister had arrived, he was a couple of hours’ ride back to the keep.

He wasn’t worried. Cora seemed to know how to be a good host even if she preferred to be the servant. However, when he got back to the keep, she was nowhere to be found.

Connor and Grace, however, had been greeted and were escorted to their chambers. “Alec!” Grace squealed and threw herself at him. Her long dark hair was flying behind her as he caught her and whirled her around. “I have missed ye! Connor is terrible to live with now that ye are gone.”

“Tell him how ye really feel,” Connor grumbled with a grin. Alec released his sister and clapped his brother on the back. “’Tis good to see ye, Alec. I have had a chance to look around, and ye are doing well. Verra well. How are the guards taking to ye? I would have twice the patrols around the keep.”

Grace rolled her eyes and gave Connor a scornful look. “Connor, ’tis all about politics and duty with ye. Boring. Alec is married! Where is yer wife! I want to meet my new sister so I can beg her to extend my

visit here.”

“How come ye arena asking me about an extended visit?” Alec asked with a frown.

“Because ye would say no, and most wives have a way of getting around that.”

So they hadn’t met Cora yet. Strange. She’d been looking forward to their visit. “There arena enough guards here to keep an eye on ye,” he said blankly. “And this isnae a safe place for the likes of ye, my darling sister.”

Grace just rolled her eyes. “Doona tell me that ye are going to be just as boring as Connor now that ye are a laird. Where is yer wife? I need some excitement, and I heard that ye married a lying Sassenach thief! She must be interesting!”

“Grace,” Connor growled. “What did I tell ye? Ye must watch yer tongue while Alec is still finding his hold here.”

“Tis alright.” Alec winked at his little sister. “I think Grace’s reputation is well-known. I’m going to change and find my wife. Dinner should be ready soon. Connor, ye can join us at the hall, but Grace, I want ye to have yer dinner here.”

“What?” Grace groaned. “Why?”

Because he still didn’t trust everyone at his table. “Because ye are too young, and this place is too rough. At home, ye have the laird’s protection. Here, my protection may not be enough. Ye can explore tomorrow.”

Connor narrowed his eyes. “There is dissent in yer clan?”

He hadn’t told them about the arrow or the brush fire, but he wanted to withhold the information until Connor got a good look at everyone at dinner. He wanted his brother’s honest opinion of the men. To see if any of them had betrayed them.

“I am still gaining their trust.”

Connor nodded his head, but Alec knew that his brother understood. Leaving his little hellion of his sister to his older brother, he went in

search of Cora.

To his surprise, he found her in her chambers.

Packing a valise.

“Cora,” he said as he tried to squash his growing fear and anger. “Is there some place that ye are planning on going?”

Her head shot up, and she was pale. Too pale, but she forced a smile. “Alec. I am so glad that you are back. I have decided to take you up on that visit with my family. I was thinking that we could leave tonight, but I suppose it is too late now. So morning then?”

“Cora.” He stared at her. What was going on inside that head of hers?

“If you are too busy, then I can make the journey on my own. Perhaps with an escort? A day or two with them should suffice.”

She looked at him, but he wasn’t even sure that she was seeing him. “Cora. My brother and my sister are here. Ye didnae greet them.”

“Oh.” She blinked and shook her head. “Yes. Your family. I am so sorry. I must have forgotten. I will rectify that mistake immediately. Let me apologize.”

As she tried to hurry by him, he grabbed her arm. “What happened, Cora? Why do ye need to see yer family?”

Tears filled her eyes. “I miss them, that’s all. I just want to know that they are safe.”

“All right. We will go see them, but we cannae go tomorrow. I promise though, as soon as I am able, we will travel to see them. When it is safe, they can come here. I wilnae keep yer family from ye, lass.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it and nodded. “I understand. Thank you.”

Drawing her close, he kissed the top of her head. He had thought it strange that she did not want to see her family, but apparently it had been building until something snapped inside of her today.

Maybe when she saw her family, she would finally feel whole again.

Hosting Connor Sinclair and Grace was her first big event since becoming Alec's wife, and she was already making a mess of it. After receiving Innes's letter, all logic had fled.

He'd made it clear that he didn't need her to give him anything. He planned on taking it. First, taking his revenge out on the Thistles, and then taking Alec's life, and finally taking her.

In that order.

The Thistles. She had to make sure that Lana was alright. She would never forgive herself if Innes got his hands on her.

Alec. How could she even have thought to ask him to take her to England? He had so much to worry about already, and his family was here. Of course he couldn't escort her.

But she would have to go, even if she had to go alone.

Mary. She would need to speak to Mary. "Alec, I am going to check the kitchens to make sure that everything is fine."

As she tried to sneak away, Alec wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. "Doona be nervous. My sister loves ye already simply because she believes ye are an ally against her horrible brothers, and Connor will respect ye because of yer support of me. The kitchens are fine, and I will have ye walking into the dining hall with me."

Cora frowned as he drew her along. "I noticed you said that your brother would *respect* me instead of *like* me," but then the doors were open, and there was no time for him to answer.

It was easy to pick out the laird of the Sinclairs. Even if he wasn't

surrounded by Alec's closest friends, Cora would have been able to see the resemblance. Alec and Connor? Same dark hair, dark eyes, strong jaw and full lips, but it was more than age that separated them. There was a hardness in Connor's eyes. Strength and power, yes, but pain as well.

"I do not see your sister," she whispered.

"My sister wilnae be joining the clan dinners. Ye will understand why when ye meet her in the morn."

Not wanting to seem weak in front of her husband's brother, she followed him to the head of the table where she dropped into a curtsy. "Laird Sinclair, it is a pleasure to meet you. I apologize for not being here during your arrival."

"Lady Cora. Sister." Connor raised her hand and kissed it. "'Tis a pleasure to meet ye, and ye doona need to apologize. Being my brother's wife must be trying yer patience."

There was a chuckle of laughter before Alec shook his head and pulled out the chair for Cora. Her tension about Connor eased just a little, but her other problem still weighed heavily on her mind, and even though she tried to keep up with the conversation of dinner, her thoughts drifted. Her fears imprisoned her.

The hours dragged on, and she finally whispered to Alec, "If it's all right, I'm feeling a little tired. I think I'll check on your sister and then go to bed. Will that be all right?"

To her surprise, he turned his head and brushed his lips against hers. "I am sorry if my family has made ye miss yers. Try not to let my sister convince ye to let her out of the keep. She has an adventurous spirit, but she always finds trouble."

Sounds like they would have much in common.

She said her farewells to Connor and the men and headed to the guest chambers. She'd just started knocking on the door when it flew open, and a young woman grinned at her. "Hello, I am Grace. Ye must be my new sister! A bonnie lass indeed! No wonder my brother was in such a hurry to wed ye!"

Before Cora could even say hello, Grace had thrown her arms around her and hugged her tightly. There was so much warmth in that hug, and for a moment, Cora remember what it was like with Lana.

“Welcome, Grace Sinclair,” she laughed. “You are right, I am Cora. It is wonderful to meet you, finally. I am sorry that the wedding was in haste. I would have loved for you to have been there.”

Grace glanced out the hall before she pulled her in and closed the door. “Ye doona have to pretend with me. I know why ye and Alec really married. Is he being kind to ye? My brothers can be a wee bit dense when it comes to women. I should know. I have seen it.”

Liking Grace more and more, Cora laughed and walked through the open doorway. While Grace flounced stomach-first on the bed, Cora sat on the chair. “Alec is a good man, and a good husband. Admittedly, I have not been a good wife, but despite my lies, he has treated me with kindness.”

“And love?”

There was hope on Grace’s face, and Cora understood. The young woman loved her brother and wanted them to be happy. “Things are complicated,” Cora said quietly as she thought of how she was about to betray Alec. “He deserves love, Grace, and I know that he’s capable of it, but I don’t think that it’s going to be with me.”

Narrowing her eyes, Grace slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position. “Ye love him.”

Tears filled her eyes at the other woman’s observation, but she refused to let them fall. Of course it was obvious that Cora loved Alec. The whole clan probably knew it. Alec probably knew it too. He was fond of her, and he’d promised to be faithful, but he would never love her.

Especially after tonight.

“I do love him,” she confessed quietly. “But as I said, things are complicated. I’m more dangerous to Alec than he could have ever imagined.”

“What the bloody hell do ye mean by that?” Grace demanded, but Cora was already rising. She needed to speak to Mary and Louise

before she made her preparations, and then she needed to finish packing.

“My path was set for me the day that I was born. A gift from the father that I only got to know briefly before he was murdered by my half-brother and his best friend. I thought that being chained in a prison for months was the worst thing that could have happened to me, but if I had known what would have come after the most handsome man I’d ever seen freed me, I would have stayed.”

“Cora, ye arena making any sense.”

Smiling, she opened the door and looked back. “You are right. I apologize. I believe that I just need to get some sleep. It was lovely meeting you, Grace.”

“I will see you in the morning,” Grace said, but Cora was already closing the door. She didn’t have the heart to tell her that she was most likely never going to see her again.

After she gave herself to Innes, she was never going to see anyone again.

When she headed up to her chambers, she found Mary and Louise waiting for her. To her horror, she saw that Mary carried her own bag. “You cannot come with me.”

“Ye wilnae make it to England without me,” Mary responded shortly. “I know Alec has refused to take ye tomorrow, and I know that ye plan on sneaking out tonight. Ye doona know the land. Ye will probably ride in circles all night.”

Cora knew that she was never going to make it to England alone. “I need you to stay and give me a head start. Let Alec know that I am ill and want to sleep alone. I trust that he will reunite with his brother until the early hours of the morning and won’t check on me until the afternoon.”

“A head start wilnae help ye get to England,” Louise pointed out.

“You were going to let me go before.”

“That is because we didnae care as much about ye as we do now.”

Oh. Well. That was good to know. “I appreciate the change of attitude, but I need the two of you here to make sure that I get my head start. I will be fine. If things go badly for me, then I need you to tell Alec that I am sorry. They are my family, and so is he, and I wanted to keep them safe.”

“Cora.” Mary leapt forward and hugged her. “What will ye do if ye find that Innes has already hurt yer family?”

“I will kill him, and then we do not have to worry about him hurting anyone ever again.”

All of the men had gone home to their beds or to their women, leaving Alec and Connor alone in the great hall. The mess had been cleared, and Alec started to feel the exhaustion setting in, but he wasn't quite ready to turn in just yet.

He hadn't realized how much he'd missed his brother. "I am glad that yer here," he acknowledged.

Connor reached out and gently probed the wound beneath his shirt. "There is always danger in power, but I did not realize how difficult it would be to take over the MacKay clan, nor did I think that there would be a direct attack against ye."

"It could have been against Cora. She is the reason that my position here is stable."

Connor sat back and sighed. "Aye. The lass from the dungeons, the supposed thief. Duncan's daughter."

"Pledged to Innes Campbell," Alec whispered. They were sour words in his mouth. If Innes ever got his hands on Cora, Alec would kill him.

"And yet the King has allowed her to marry ye. 'Tis a blessing."

"Not for her. She's had her choices stolen from her the moment that Duncan entered her life, and I didnae treat her well in the beginning."

"Ye love her now?"

Before he could answer, the doors to the great hall opened, and Grace came rushing inside. Both Alec and Connor stood and bellowed at her at the same time.

"Stop," Grace snapped as she rolled her eyes. "Doona waste yer

breath. I know ye want to tell me that I should be in my room where it is safe, but I had a most disturbing conversation with Cora. I tried to sleep, but I cannae. I think something is wrong.”

“Disturbing?” Alec frowned. “What do ye mean?”

Just then, another woman hurried through the open door. Mary. “Laird Alec. Laird Connor. Lady Grace. I apologize for interrupting. Cora wanted me to let ye know that she has fallen ill, and she will retire in her chambers tonight.”

“Ill?” Alec was surprised. Cora looked nervous at dinner but not sick. “Is she alright?”

The blood drained from Mary’s face, but she nodded.

Grace narrowed her eyes. “I spoke to her less than an hour ago, and she didnae look ill.”

“’Twas sudden,” the servant said faintly.

Lying. She was lying.

“Mary, what is going on? Is Cora alright?” Alec asked.

When Mary’s eyes filled with tears, Alec’s stomach knotted, and the pleasant buzz from the wine disappeared. He remembered the last time he’d felt like this.

When Cora had tried to leave him.

“She is on her way to England,” Alec spat. “Damn her, I told her that I would take her myself. Did she doubt me?”

“No,” Mary said softly. “She doesn’t doubt ye, but she fears she doesna have the time to wait.”

“Time? Has someone in her family fallen ill?” No. That didn’t make sense. Her family didn’t even know that she was alive. She wouldn’t have known if someone had fallen ill. “Mary, a letter came through yesterday. A message. It was for ye.”

“Nay.” Mary shook her head. “I sent and received the messages, but it wasnae meant for me.”

“Who was the message from?” Alec demanded. “Who?!”

When Mary didn’t answer immediately, Alec had his answer. “Damnation. After all this time, after she told me that she was hiding nothing else from me, she was still communicating with him.”

“Him who?” Connor asked.

“Innes Campbell. Mary, what do ye know?” The servant looked torn, and Alec acknowledged her loyalty, but this wasn’t the time for it. “She wilnae make it to England alone. She isnae strong enough to make it out of the Highlands, let alone find her way through the Lowlands alone, but I need to know what I am up against. She got a letter from Innes and is on her way to her family. Is she running from him or from me?”

“Neither,” Mary said finally. “Innes has always known who she was. He was there when Seth killed her father. They would have killed her too, but Innes is obsessed with her. Has been from the moment he laid eyes on her. That is why they imprisoned her. When people forgot about the daughter of Duncan, Seth promised Cora to Innes.”

With a gasp, Grace pressed her hand to her mouth. “She told me that she thought that dungeon was the most horrible time, but Innes has still been torturing her. Threatening her, hasn’t he?”

“Not just her.” Mary looked at Alec. “He’s claimed to have her sister, Lana, watched and followed. If she told anyone, then he would kill her, and when that arrow came, she feared that it was marked for Alec.”

She was protecting him. That sweet little wife who’d been fighting from the moment he laid eyes on her, was protecting him. “The message, Mary, what did it say?”

“She asked him what he wanted,” Mary sobbed. “She offered to give him anything that he wanted, but he wrote that he didn’t want her to give him anything. He was going to take it. First her family. Then her husband. Then her. She was going to England to check on her family.”

“Mary, find Jamie and Stephen. Tell them to ride to the Thistles immediately. They are to protect them. Connor, I need ye to stay here

and pen a letter to the King. Tell him that Innes was there when Duncan died.”

“And what are ye going to do?”

“I know my wife well, and she is a liar,” Alec said grimly. “She isnae going to England. She is going to Innes. The little fool is hoping to sacrifice herself for her family.”

Grace reached out and slapped Alec. “And for ye, Alec. She loves ye. When ye go to rescue her, ye remember that.”

She loved him. Seeing the anger in Grace’s eyes, he knew that it was true. Reaching out, he cupped her chin. “Doona worry, little sister. I will. Come. There is no time to lose. Thankfully, Cora doesna know the terrain well. I will probably find her walking around in circles.”

*B*ack in chains. Wonderful plan, Cora. At least this time, I can sit.

Testing the bolts against the wall, she glanced at the closed door as it creaked open. Walking into the Campbells' territory hadn't been the smartest plan. She'd hoped that she could avoid Innes and appeal directly to his brother, but she'd underestimated his reach. Of course he'd have men who were loyal to him.

Now she was in chains, and she had a feeling that it wasn't going to be Mac Campbell walking through the door.

At first, he didn't say anything as he walked in. Just smiled triumphantly, as though her walking in to give herself up meant it was his victory. Like terrorizing a woman was a battle that he'd won. "Do ye think that ye giving yerself up means that I will spare yer family? Yer sweet little Lana and that husband who has been rutting between your legs every night?"

"Just the very fact that you didn't get there first means that I won."

Innes roared and lunged at her. When she tried to scramble out of the way, he just grabbed her chains and jerked her back. "When I am done with ye, my sweet little Cora, yer husband will never want ye again."

His fingers dug into her waist, and he jerked her skirts up, but before he could touch her, the door opened again, and another man stood in the doorway. "Innes Campbell, what the devil are ye doing?" Mac hissed. "Chaining up the new Sinclair bride?"

"MacKay," Cora breathed heavily. "I am MacKay, and by being their laird, so is Alec. Laird Campbell, I came to see you. I should have come to you long ago, but I didn't know where your loyalties lie. I still

don't."

"Quiet," Innes hissed, but this was Cora's chance, and she wasn't going to let it go.

"He was there when Seth killed my father," Cora yelled. "I remember what they said. What they promised each other. Innes would help Seth kill his father, and in return, he would help Innes kill you. Two madmen with their own clans. Innes may be your brother, but is not loyal."

"Lies!" Innes backhanded her, and she fell into the stone and struck her head. Pain exploded in her skull, and she crumpled to the ground, but she struggled to maintain her vision.

"Innes," Mac said warily. "I have wondered. Ye and Seth never did anything alone."

Slowly, Innes withdrew his sword. His eyes were as cold as the iron around her wrists. "Ye never treated me like a brother. Never treated me like family. Never listened to me. The Campbells suffer because ye are more concerned about maintaining our allies then growing our power and strength. Under me, they will."

Mac. He'd come in here unarmed. Cora saw the fear in his eyes, the truth.

She'd gotten him killed. As the blackness narrowed her vision, she had one last thought.

This is all I'm good for. Getting people killed...



There were still heavy chains around her wrist. That was her first observation when she came to. Keeping her eyes closed, she tried to figure out what had happened. If Mac had struck his younger brother down, then she would be free.

Wouldn't she?

Her head still hurt, but she wasn't alone. Footsteps sounded as someone paced from one wall to the other.

“Cora, my dear, I know that ye are awake,” Innes said seductively. “Ye might as well open yer eyes.”

Nausea rolled in her stomach, but she wasn’t going to hide from him. She wasn’t going to let him bully her anymore. Sitting up, she opened her eyes and realized that she was still chained, but she’d changed locations.

Now she was chained to a bed and someone had dressed her in a nearly sheer nightdress.

Imagining Innes’s hands on her naked skin, she nearly vomited right then and there.

There were two other guards in the chamber, but Mac was nowhere to be seen. “Did you kill your brother? Surely that’s an act of treason, and his men will rise up against you and take their revenge.”

Innes curled his lip. “I have been painstakingly turning his men against me,” he growled. “Ye interrupted before I could finish, my sweet, but I have enough. We can take them.”

Take them. Hope rose inside of her. “Your brother isn’t dead.”

“He ran, the coward. Apparently there are still secrets in this keep that I have yet to discover.” Cold fury vibrated in his voice, and she knew that wouldn’t end well for her.

“Then I suggest you go chase him.” And leave her alone.

Baring his teeth, he grabbed the goblet that rested on the table and hurled it against the wall. She jumped at the sound and scrambled off the bed, but the chains did not allow her to get very far. She’d be damned if she stayed there waiting for him like some docile little thing.

“First my brother.” Grabbing her, Innes yanked her up against his body. “And then ye will have my full attention.” He kissed her hard, and she brought her foot down on his hard and shoved him away. Chuckling, he released her, and she fell back on the bed.

“My husband will come for me. Tell me, Innes, do you have the resources to fight on two fronts? Let me go, and you may still survive

this.”

The horrid man just smirked. “Perhaps, but ye came here willing, lass. What man would go after his traitorous wife when she betrayed him? I have a feeling that he will happily leave ye here to rot. These men will be here to watch ye, so if ye start screaming, they have my permission to put that pretty little mouth to some other kind of use,” he said as he turned. Cora kept facing the wall until she heard the door close, and then, looking down at the small silver key tucked away in the palm of her hand, she smiled to herself.

Now all she had to do was bide her time and not let his words steal away the last of her hope.

Alec did not have the men he wanted to take with him, but he could not leave the MacKays defenseless. With his friends—Kane and a few other most loyal of the MacKay warriors, and several of the Sinclair guards—he rode hard and fast to the Campbell land. With any luck, Laird Mac Campbell didn't know of his brother's obsession and would help.

If he didn't, then the gods help him as well because nothing short of death would let Alec give up on his wife, and he wasn't so certain that even that would stop him.

Early scouts were unable to find Cora, and he just knew that his sweet little wife knew that there was no point in traveling to England on her own. She'd gone straight to the source of the problem, and by now, Innes would have her in his clutches.

Bile rose in his throat when he thought of all the things that he could be doing to her. Cora would survive. He would do whatever it took to make sure that she healed and knew that he wouldn't let anyone else harm her ever again.

It didn't take long before they were joined by Campbell guards. "Halt," their leads barked. "Name yer business."

The sly look in his eyes told Alec that they would find no sympathy in this man. No, he knew just what was happening in the keep, and he planned to make sure that it wasn't interrupted.

Alec drew his sword, and his men followed suit. "Innes Campbell has taken my wife. Ye will let me pass, or ye will be slaughtered where ye stand."

"My laird hasnae left this keep in days. If there is a bonnie lass with

him, then she has come willingly.” He and the Campbell guards snickered.

“Ye speak of treason, for Mac Campbell is yer laird,” Alec hissed.

“Mac Campbell is dead. Innes is laird, and we swear fealty to him.”

So Innes had disposed of his brother. It didn’t surprise Alec. He didn’t like Mac, but he trusted the man far more than he did his younger brother. “I will give ye one more chance. Let me pass to see my wife, or die.”

“Tis a shame that the new MacKay laird throws his life away so easily. Perhaps ‘twould be best if the MacKays were under Campbell rule,” the captain said as he drew his sword. Then, they charged.

Alec and his men were outnumbered, and the MacKays were greatly skilled, but they didn’t fight with the same passion and desperation as he and his men did. Knowing that Cora’s life was at stake was all he needed to slash his way through. Echoes of battle cries and the slash of swords echoed off the trees, and when more Campbell men came to their aid, Alec fought his way through them too.

When they were surrounded, he turned and looked back. So far, all of his men were standing, but there was blood. “Surrender,” the Campbell captain demanded.

Suddenly, there was a war cry from the woods, and all heads turned as another dozen men rushed to them on horseback. They wore no colors; in fact, they looked like farmers, but they didn’t hesitate or slow as they descended. It took only a moment for Alec to realize that the new group of men were targeting Campbells.

And only the Campbells.

When the surviving guards retreated, Alec turned, his sword hitting another, and he looked into familiar green eyes.

“Ye are Alec Sinclair, new laird of the MacKays?” he asked without lowering his sword.

“Aye,” Alec said tensely.

For a moment, Alec thought the young man would issue a challenge

until Kane stepped forward. With a grin, the young man lowered his sword and dropped to his knee. One by one, the new men did the same. "I am Daniel MacKay. We are all MacKay blood, and fiercely proud of it until Seth took over for his father. When we refused to swear fealty to a man who would let his own people starve, we fled lest we be murdered in our sleep. Kane and my sister speak highly of ye. We arrived at yer keep just as ye left, and we rode to yer aid when we heard that Duncan's daughter was in trouble."

These were the men that Seth had run off. Strong, strapping lads, and skillful with a sword. "Rise," he told the boy. "Today, I am thankful for yer aid, and when I have earned yer trust and respect, then ye may kneel before me."

He turned to Kane. "Thank ye," he said softly.

The man just shrugged. "We need Mackay blood. Yer lot is looking a little haggard."

Bleeding from his arm, Jamie reached out and decked him half-heartedly, and the men laughed. "The cowards that ran will be telling Innes of our arrival. This isnae over yet."

After ensuring that all wounds were superficial, they regrouped and made their way to the keep. There were no other interruptions, but Alec was no fool. Seeing no guards standing at the gate or at the doors, he knew that Innes was waiting for him inside.

They all filed in and found Innes waiting for him inside. His men lined the walls, each with a weapon in their hand. From the looks of things, they outnumbered Alec and his men three to one.

And yet his men didn't waiver.

"I heard ye were spouting lies that I kidnapped yer sweet little wife," Innes said casually. "For yer head alone, I could have that."

"Are ye claiming that she isnae here?"

A vile smile spread over the man's face. "Oh, she is here, chained to the bed of my chambers and guarded. I hear she likes it that way."

"For that alone, ye will die, but yer men here doona have to die with

ye. When the King hears word that ye killed yer brother, ye will not have this clan for long, Innes.”

“The King!” Innes spat and jumped to his feet, drawing his sword. “For years, we have heard of the Sinclair heroes. First yer father, and then the beloved sons. It must be nice to be the King’s favorite, but ye couldnae even keep yer wife by yer side. I cannae wait to kill ye.”

Alec liked the murderous look in the man’s eye. He wanted Innes’s men to see him for his crazed and depraved obsession. “What are ye waiting for?”

Glancing behind Alec, Innes hesitated. Even outnumbered, he was worried. A coward. “Ye and me,” he declared finally. “Strike me down, and the lovely Cora is yers.”

“Yer word is no good, Innes. We all know that, but believe me when I tell ye that will not leave her alive. For all yer bluster of having a clan, ye havnae the strength for it.”

With furious bellow, Innes attacked. Alec deflected the blow, but he hadn’t realized how much the previous fight had taken out of him, and Innes managed to push him back just a little. Behind him, his men watched, tensed, but they didn’t intervene.

“Ye were there when Seth killed Duncan MacKay,” Alec goaded him. “Cora heard every word out of yer mouth, but then, ye didnae care what she heard, did ye? Ye never expected her to survive that night. Tell me, Innes, are all of the Campbell women so ugly that ye had to chain an English lass up for six months in hopes of getting a woman?”

Around him, he heard some of the MacKay guards inhale sharply. So they didn’t know.

Interesting.

“Lies,” Innes growled as he struck again, but he moved too slow, and Alec deflected it easily and returned with a blow to the stomach, but Innes danced away.

“Then ye had to threaten her sister to keep Cora in line. Threaten a wee lass of fourteen years. Tell me, Innes, do ye have any idea what it is to actually face a man in combat or must ye always threaten those

weaker than ye to get what ye want?”

Clank. Their swords met again, and then Innes’s fury drove him harder and powered his hits. He was more skilled than Alec anticipated, and neither man had managed to get a slice of the other.

“Ye threatened the life of my wife under the roof of the King,” Alec grunted. “Ye have no loyalty, and the men and women here should look to what happened under Seth’s rule because that is what awaits them. Cut from the same cloth.”

“Seth was nothing like me,” Innes hissed as he pushed Alec back and swung. The sword whistled through the air and just barely missed Alec’s chest. “He was cruel but he didnae want power. He just didnae want to do his father’s bidding anymore. He wanted to languish in the keep all day while women dropped to their knees in front of him. In time, I planned to have my clan and Seth’s too, and then I would wield the most power in the Highlands.”

“Power to rival the King. Ye are a treasonous bastard.”

He deflected and spun, digging his elbow into Innes’s stomach. As the man doubled over, he spun again and brought his sword down, slicing the man’s shoulder, but while his shirt swelled with blood, Innes didn’t even seem to feel the pain. He was too far gone to his own insanity, and Alec couldn’t block the sword fast enough. It sliced through his thigh, and he fell to his knees.

Cackling like a madman, Innes raised his sword and charged.

“No!” a female voice screamed, and Innes looked up, just for a second to see Cora on the balcony looking over.

It was all that Alec needed. Swinging his sword up, he buried it in Innes’s belly.

With a groan, the Campbell fell and chaos broke out as several of Campbell’s men bellowed and attacked. Alec’s men defended, and Alec trusted them as he rose and looked up and bellowed Cora’s name. She turned just in time to see someone attacking her, and she swung something in her hands and knocked the man upside the head. He tumbled over the railing and fell to his death on the stone below.

Then, she was gone.

“Cora!” Alec cried again desperately as he fought his way through the men toward the stairs that would lead him to her. How she got free from the chains and the guards, he had no idea, but he would thank the fates every day that she had.

Suddenly, the door flew open, and Cora charged into the fray with a sword. It was obvious that she had no training and barely the strength to even lift it. “Protect her!” Alec cried desperately. He was still too far away.

All of his men were too far away.

Then, to his surprise, it was a Campbell who defended her when another attempted to seize her.

“Cease fighting,” a male voice roared. “Or be cut down immediately.”

Campbell swords dropped, and Alec turned his head to see Mac Campbell standing there, fire and fury in his eyes, and a dozen men behind him.

Alec and his men remained tense. Although they were not at war, the Campbells had never been allies with the Sinclairs, and Alec doubted that had changed simply because he’d taken over the MacKays. For all he knew, Mac shared his younger brother’s thirst for power. Not once, since Alec had taken over, had Mac come to congratulate him or offer his people as allies.

No, he’d always sent Innes, and Innes had taken every opportunity to traumatize Cora further.

“Alec Sinclair,” Mac said as he walked through the crowd. His dark hair had grayed with age and, most likely, stress since he was hardly five years older than Alec. “I understand that my brother has acted against ye and taken something that was yers. For that, I hope that ye doona hold it against me and my people.”

“Yer brother is dead,” Alec said coldly as he stepped aside so Mac could see his brother’s body.

There was pain and anguish on the older man’s face, but he also

looked tired. "For some time, I suspected that my brother had a hand in Duncan's death and was plotting against me. A suspicion I shared with those most loyal to me, and 'tis why I was prepared if he acted against me. Had ye not killed him, then I would have had to slay him myself. I suppose I owe ye my thanks. 'Tis an act I would not have relished."

"How do I know that ye didnae have a hand in this?" Alec demanded. "Innes told me and others that ye were dead, and yet here ye are, as alive as can be."

"Alec," Cora said, her voice much weaker than he would have liked. "I saw what happened between Innes and Mac. If Innes and his men had not attacked, I believe that Mac would have escorted me to home and safety. If you hold someone accountable for the actions of their blood, then you would have to remember that Seth and I also share the same blood."

Mac shook his head sadly. "I didnae want to see what my brother had become. I wanted to believe that Seth was the influencer of the two, but there is no one to blame but Innes. I have my own reparations to make. When I am done here, weeding out the guards who were disloyal to me and supported Innes's plots, then I hope that ye and I can meet and be allies. Despite what my father said, the Campbells doona stand against the King."

"When ye are ready, my doors will be open to ye," Alec said as he reached out and clasped the older man's hand. "Now if ye excuse me, I intend to get my wife and my wounded back to my keep as swiftly as possible."

"Ye have safe passages, and Lady Cora, I hope that my brother did not harm ye."

"I am fine," she said before she swayed and crumpled to the ground.

*M*anacles were clamped around her arms again, and hands reached for her. In the darkness, Innes's laughter froze her blood, and she pulled helplessly at the chains. Not again. God, please, not again. She would not be a helpless prisoner against the monster. She would not!

"Cora," a voice soothed. "Cora, ye are having a nightmare, ye must wake up now, lass. Ye must."

She knew that voice. Her husband. Her husband who had risked his life to come save her. It pulled her from the nightmare, and when she opened her eyes, sunlight streamed into the room. There was no more darkness, and when she reached for her wrists, they were free.

She was free. But she hurt all over.

"Cora, there ye are. Easy now," Alec said as he sat on the edge of her bed and looked down at her uncertainly. "Innes is gone. Dead. Ye have no reason to fear him again."

"What happened? How did I get here?" she asked as she tried to sit up. Her body felt weak, as though she hadn't eaten in ages, but that made no sense. She wasn't even Innes's captive for more than a day.

"Ye caught ill. The healer said it probably took root when ye rode out in the rain, and it overcame ye quickly. Ye have been fighting a fever for nearly a week now. I didnae think that ye were going to make it."

A week. A whole week had passed? "You are all right? Jamie? Stephen? They were wounded. I saw the blood. Lord, your thigh!"

"We lost no men that day, and even now, I believe Jamie has some bonnie MacKay warming his bed and tending to him," he joked with a

smile before his expression turned serious again. "I will have the healer come examine ye."

No. She didn't want him to leave, but as she reached for him, he deftly moved out of her grasp and opened the door.

With a heavy heart, she realized that he had yet to touch her. Did he think that she had betrayed him? Innes's nasty words echoed in her head. She had left him, without a word, just as she had tried to do before, but he had come for her. Come to rescue her. Surely he wouldn't do that if he didn't want her by his side?

The door opened, but it was not the healer that bounded in the room.

Cora's eyes widened as a young woman threw herself on the bed. "Cora! Cora!" Lana burst into tears and wrapped her arms around her. "You are alive! I cannot believe it!"

"Lana, really, you must let Cora breathe."

Shocked, Cora watched as the Thistles followed in, both of them crying a little as they saw her. Wordlessly, she looked up at her husband. "Mary told me what had been happening," Alec said gruffly. "We reached out to the Thistles to make sure that they were safe, and they insisted on seeing ye. I thought, now that I could protect them, that ye would want to see them."

"Thank you," Cora said softly and wrapped her arms around her sister. As they cried, Alec quickly slipped out of the room.

Finally, when they separated, Donna handed her a glass of water and sat on the edge of the bed. With no room left on the bed, Calvin pulled up a chair and reached for her hands. "Life hasn't been the same since we thought you dead," he said quietly. "I can think of no happier moment than when a terrifying highlander nearly beat down our door, told us that our lives were in danger, and that you were still alive."

"Bryce Sinclair," Lana whispered. "He was so handsome and so savage. Two other highlanders came charging out from across the street, and he slew them right then and there. We had to call for a runner, and honestly, I thought the runners were going to pass away from fear when they saw him, but they explained everything."

“Innes was having you watched.” Cora shuddered. “I wanted to believe it was a bluff. You are here!”

“Where else would we be, dear?” Donna asked as she reached for Cora’s other hand. “You are our daughter, blood or not, and we were not going to sit idly by and wait for more news. We needed to come see for ourselves how you were doing. The young Sinclair man escorted us back here, and you were already so sick, we feared we were going to lose you all over again.”

They started crying even more and embracing each other. Cora couldn’t believe that Alec had done this for her, was allowing more English under his roof so she could reunite with her family.

So why wasn’t he here?

The healer entered and ordered them all out. “I have to go tell Grace that you are awake,” Lana said as she rose. “I know that she’ll want to see you. And Mary and Louise. Louise has been cooking a special meal for you every day in case you woke up.”

“Which I will fetch now,” Donna said. “But we will be right back. Do not fear.”

They left, and Cora looked at the older woman. “So?” she asked finally with a brave smile. “Am I going to make it?”

“Lass, I have called ye Sassenach under my breath ever since I met ye, but after what ye have survived, now I can only call ye a highlander because I know that ’tis Duncan’s blood that runs through ye and ’tis the only reason that ye have survived this long.”

Cora smiled. “That is only because you never met my mother.”



After the healer had come to him and abruptly announced that Cora would survive, Alec gave his wife the time she needed with her family and friends. Not only did they take up her time, but Connor, Grace, and quite a few of the men streamed in to tell her how thankful they were that she’d survived.

When the last had reported that she'd eaten and gone back to sleep, Alec chose to have his dinner alone. The last few days had been exhausting. Not one but three MacKays had come forward to confess that they had been passing along information to Innes, but they were adamant that it was the Campbells who had shot at them and had set fire to the village crops to weaken Alec's hold on the clan. Because they had come forward, and because they swore they had no idea what Innes really had planned, Alec had sentenced the three strapping lads to labor on the watchtowers for three months rather than exile or prison.

He was just about finished when the door opened and the Thistles walked in. Donna and Calvin were cautious, but Lana immediately pulled out her chair and sat down. "What are your intentions toward my sister?" she demanded.

Alec looked up at Calvin and saw the same determined look on their face. "I have already married her," he said slowly. "'Twas legal and sanctioned by the King. Now that Innes is dead, there is no fear that it will be dissolved and she forced to wed another."

Lana rolled her eyes, and suddenly, he wondered if it was a good idea that the young lass was spending so much time with Grace. The two of them were a force to be reckoned with. "I don't mean legally. Cora was taken from her home, forced to witness the murder of her father, imprisoned, forced to marry you, and then kidnapped again. How many more dangers will she face here? Can you keep her safe?"

Alec's chest tightened. He didn't want to think about all that Cora had gone through. It was hard enough to know that he was going to have to face a future without her. "With Innes dead, there are no more threats against her, but I have already received a missive from the King. My place as laird here is secure. Cora is no longer a political chess piece. I intend for our marriage to be the freedom that she deserves."

"What does that mean?" Lana demanded.

Alec stared knowingly at Calvin. "She is free to go home with you. Though she will never be able to wed another, I will not interfere with the life she chooses to lead in England. She will be allowed a large

allowance to do and live as she wishes. I hope she finds happiness.”

“And if she is carrying?” Donna asked softly.

Alec flinched at the knowledge. “If there is a child, I wilnae take it from its mother, but it wilnae grow up abandoned by me. We will find a way to raise it in both worlds as it will be heir to the MacKay clan.”

Lana’s eyes filled with tears, and she rose, her gaze accusatory. “How could you not love her? How could you be married to her and have spent all this time with her and not love her? I do not understand you, Alec Sinclair, and I think I hate you!”

As she ran from the room, Donna followed behind her, but Calvin stayed behind. “Cora would stay,” he said softly. “If she knew how much you loved her, she would stay with you.”

“Cora has been stripped of her choices for too long. Aye, she’d stay, whether she thought I loved her or not. She would stay out of duty because that is the kind of woman that she is. I have dealt a hand in her misery here. I didnae trust her. Perhaps if I had, she would have told me the truth rather than running to her death. There is nothing I could give her that would make her happier than her freedom.”

Calvin cocked his head. “England does not speak highly of the Scottish and even worse of highlanders, but in the few days that I have been here, I don’t think I’ve ever met more honorable men. I agree that you could have treated her better, but I will tell you right now that if you force her to go home with us, you are still stripping her of her choice. We welcome her home, of course, with open arms, but a man who loves her would give her the chance to choose.”

He headed for the door and turned back. “You have underestimated her before, highlander. I trust that you will not do it again.”

*T*rapped in another nightmare, Cora screamed and fought, but when she woke, the arms around her were warm and loving. “I have ye,” Alec whispered as he tenderly kissed the top of her head. “I have ye, Cora.”

“You’re here.” Night had fallen, and the room was dark, but Cora turned to him and snuggled into his embrace. “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“I hadn’t planned to,” he admitted. “I thought perhaps ye would want to spend the night with yer sister.”

“I am overjoyed to see them, but it is you that I want by my side, Alec.” Her chest squeezed painfully. He was acting so strangely earlier. “You are still angry with me.”

Rising up on his elbows, he stared down at her, and his eyes were stormy with anger. “That ye would put yer own life in danger to protect me? Aye. I am furious. If Mary had not confessed yer plan to travel to England, I may not have gotten to ye in time.”

“You did not go to England?”

“No, I know my wife better than that.” His expression softened, and anguish filled his eyes, and when he opened his mouth, he couldn’t speak.

Cora clutched at his body and buried her face in his shoulder, and he stroked her hair. “I did trust you. I didn’t at first, but when I realized the kind of man that you were, I knew that I could trust you, but if I told you what Innes was doing, you could have gotten yourself killed. To save the Thistles, I could have gotten you killed. To keep you safe, I could have gotten them killed. I couldn’t live with either of those. I

did go to sacrifice myself to Innes. I had hoped to speak to Mac, hoped that he did not know what his brother was doing.”

“Ye knew that there was a chance that ye would not make it,” Alec whispered harshly. “Ye knew that ye could be sacrificing yerself. Cora, nothing in this world is worth yer life. Certainly not me.”

Filled with love, she simply held him. “Will you be mad long? I do not know that I could bare it. You left, and it broke my heart. Promise me that you will forgive me soon.”

“Cora.” He pulled out of his embrace and stared down at her, and instinctively, she feared what he would say next. “I did not stay away from ye because I was mad at ye. I thought it would be easier for me. Ye have found naught but misery here, and I wanted to give ye some peace. Some happiness. I was going to let ye leave with the Thistles. Live yer life in England with yer family.”

“You were what?” Pushing herself up, she glared at him.

“Ye deserve happiness. Ye deserve the choice to live as ye please. I wilnae abandon ye. Ye will get an allowance that will allow ye to live like a lady in England. If there is a bairn...” His voice broke and he put a hand over her belly. “If we have made a wee bairn, then we will both be a part of his or her life, but I wilnae force ye to stay here.”

“Alec Sinclair!” Absolutely furious, she pushed his hand away and nearly smacked him. Instead, she scrambled off the bed and started to pace. “I have thought many horrible things about you, but not once did I think you were an absolute idiot! Live in England? I am your wife! Aside from them, I love you. Despite you being a bloody moron, I absolutely adore you. I cannot imagine a life without you, and you think it will make me happy if you banish me?”

To his credit, Alec winced. “I suppose I deserve yer wrath, but if ye continue to shout, ye will wake the whole keep.”

“Good! I want them to wake up. I want them to witness this so you can never again doubt me. If you even dare try to send me away, I will simply come back. Again and again until I drive you so mad that you have no choice but to accept me because I know that you love me, and I am so bloody tired of people making decisions for me. To hell

and back, Alec, I will be by your side.”

“I had no idea ye could swear so,” he said, but he was grinning like a fool.

Her heart swelled with love. “I am just getting started. Oh, Alec, tell me that you love me.”

“Aye, Cora. I am a bloody moron, but loving ye has been the wisest choice that I have ever made. If ye will stay with me and find yer happiness here, then I will never leave yer side. I swear it!”

“Tis about time!” Grace yelled, and Cora turned and gasped. The door was partly open. Walking over, she opened it the rest of the way and saw that the hallway was filled with people listening in. Grace grinned sheepishly from her spot on the ground. “We’ve been here all night, waiting to see if ye were going to stay with my idiot of a brother.”

Alec growled behind her, but Cora only laughed. They were the strangest mix of people. Sinclairs. MacKays. Servants. Guards. And the Thistles. All nodded at her encouragingly. Her family had expanded, and she couldn’t be more happy about it.

“You have your answer,” she said primly. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to close this door and kiss my husband.”

They cheered, and she reddened, closed the door, and turned to do just that.

A year later

The wee lad screamed, his lungs even stronger than the day he was born, and even then, he threatened to crumble the stone walls with his wails. Alec plucked him up from his crib and cradled him carefully as he walked from the nursery. “Easy there, Son,” he crooned. “Ye know that ye will have everyone running when ye cry.”

It was true. Less than a month old, and absolutely everyone adored him. Today was a big day for him. The priest was there to baptize him, and the keep was bursting with people who would stand witness. King Edward. The Thistles. The Sinclairs. Even Mac Campbell, who was slowly becoming not just an ally, but a friend as well.

All of them eager to hold him if he even looked like he would shed a tear.

“Are you sure about this?” Cora asked him again as she joined him and curved a hand around his cheek.

“Aye,” he told her assuredly. “I have already spoken to the priest and to my brother. I have no doubts.”

“I love you, Alec Sinclair. Every day, my love only grows stronger.”

Leaning down, he captured his wife’s mouth and kissed her lovingly. “And I you.”

Together, they made their way down to the great hall. Normally, they would have the christening in the church, but there were too many people bearing witness that day. The chamber, cleared of tables and chairs, was filled from wall to wall for Alec did not deny any from the clan who wanted to witness. Those that could not fit in the room spilled into the hall and outside the keep awaiting the news.

A hush fell over as they made their way to the front, and Father Donnelly nodded his head and opened his arms for the child. Alec handed his son off.

“What name is given to this child?” Donnelly asked.

Alec looked up and faced the room. Every MacKay in this room, in the hall, standing outside, and working the fields in the land had sworn fealty to him, and in return, he’d sworn to lead and protect them. As each sank to their knees, he saw the question in their eyes even as they didn’t voice it out loud. They were MacKay but led by a Sinclair. What did that make them?

“This child is named Duncan Gregory Sinclair MacKay,” he said, his voice booming in the hall. Although there was no surprise on the faces of the King, his brother, and his friends, a gasp swept out. “Named for his two grandfathers, his father, and the blood of the land, for while I was christened a Sinclair, I am bound to the MacKays, and so my son shall bear the clan name.”

Tears filled Cora’s eyes, and the Father dipped his hand in the basin of water and marked Duncan’s forehead. “Duncan Gregory Sinclair

MacKay, I baptize ye in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May ye grow and shine in His love, be protected by the spirits and ancestors of this land, and be always surrounded by the love of the witnesses in this chamber.”

A thunderous applause filled the room and Alec reached out to take his son, who was now wailing louder than the cheers. Leaning down, he kissed his son’s head and took his wife’s hand.



As with every Scottish event, a great feast and party followed. Seated at the table, rocking her son back and forth, Cora leaned against Alec, who wrapped a protective hand around her shoulders. It had only been three weeks since she’d given birth, and he would have liked to see her in bed, but although she looked tired, she assured him that she wanted to be a part of the celebration. Still, he did not ask her to dance, and he glared at anyone who looked like they might.

The babe got passed around to uncles, aunts, and friends. The Thistles had been there for two months, even Lana, to see Cora through the birth and help out. Lana had, according to her father, been a terror during the first season and not a single man dared asked to marry her. Privately, he told Alec he thought his daughter had done it on purpose. Apparently now she wanted to marry a highlander.

Personally, Alec thought Calvin was pleased. Lana was still too young to be married, and Calvin wanted to keep his daughter close a little longer.

Grace visited frequently, usually when Connor grew tired of trying to handle her. She had men from four different clans constantly asking for her hand in marriage. She turned down every single one and started threatening Connor that she would challenge them to a duel if he approved of any behind her back.

“Who knew,” the King said loudly to Connor, “that it would take an English lass to finally get Alec Sinclair to settle down?”

The table laughed, and Kane winked. “Not an English lass. A MacKay. A MacKay who defeated two guards while chained to a wall. No

English lass could do that.”

Lana snorted and rolled her eyes. “Really? How exactly do you think Cora did that?”

Even Alec turned to look at his wife. After all this time, she’d never gone into detail about what had happened that day. Alec had sworn that no matter what, even if Innes had forced himself on her, he would help her heal, mentally and physically, but she’d told him that it had never come to that.

“How did ye free yerself?” Jamie asked. “We have all wondered.”

Cora averted her eyes. “Well, I unlocked the manacles, and when the first guard tried to touch me, I simply locked the manacle around his hand and stole his sword and attacked the other. They weren’t ready for that. I had the element of surprise on my side.”

“Ye unlocked the manacles,” Alec repeated slowly. “How did ye do that?”

“With the key, of course.”

When everyone stared at her, Donna cleared her throat. “You must understand that her mother was a survivor. Before she could accumulate a more comfortable life,” she explained delicately, “she had to survive on the streets. She picked up a few skills, and to make sure that her daughter was never defenseless, she taught them to her.”

Alec’s mouth dropped open. “Ye picked their pockets for the key?”

“Yes. Innes had the key. I picked his pocket.” Finally, she looked up and shrugged. “I explained when we first met that I was a thief. It is not my fault that you did not believe me.”

“Ye deceitful little bride,” he growled, and while everyone laughed, he bent his head and kissed his beloved wife in front of everyone to see.

Duncan woke up and wailed.



Anger and fury kept her warm in the Scotland cold as she rode from

the inn to the keep. It was later than Lana expected, nearly midnight, but she knew the way well. Over the past four years, she'd visited her honorary sister often so she could spoil her nephew and little niece. This was, however, the first time she'd made the journey alone.

Her parents thought she was spending the week with her friend Imogene. They'd be furious to discover that she'd hired a coach to see her safely through Scotland, but she had to ride on horseback through the Highlands. Thankfully, she rode through the Sinclair lands first, and Connor had graciously, even if surprised, let her stay the night and given her a three-man escort the rest of the way.

She was no fool. She knew the moment that he'd been alerted to her presence, he'd sent a messenger to Cora and Alec. Since her escorts were stopping every few hours, even forcing her to stop at the inn for dinner even though they were so close, she was well aware they were giving the messenger time to get there first.

So when torches lit up the border of his lands, and Lana saw Alec standing there, she wasn't afraid. "Lana," he said in a low voice. "Are ye well?"

She heard the underlying anger. In the past few years, he'd come to see her as his own younger sister and was protective of her.

She wondered what he would do if he discovered the real reason that she was there.

"Yes, thank you, Alec," she said as though his was the most natural visit in the world. "I am sorry to arrive unannounced, but I hope you won't mind my visit. I very much wanted to see Cora and the babies."

Even in the barely lit dark, she could feel his suspicious gaze on her, but it wasn't her brother-in-law that she was interested in. No, she was staring at another. The real reason that she was here.

Stephen Sinclair.

There was no mistaking the large man who sat rigid on his horse. She'd come to know that outline well and the anger in his dark gaze. Come to know it because for the last three seasons, he'd sat outside her house, in the shadows, staring up at her window. Because he so

easily broke into the houses hosting parties and events and watched her from afar.

Her own highland stalker.

At first, she had assumed that her father had reached out to Alec and asked for his help after that one little debacle. She'd tried to tell him that there wasn't anything to worry about. The son of a duke had gotten a little randy with her in the gardens and grew a little belligerent when she'd told him no. Apparently he'd made a bet with his pasty and spoiled little friends about taking her by the end of the season, and he would not be denied.

Until his manly bits met her knee and his nose met her fist.

The next year, the first event of the season, there was Stephen Sinclair.

"Of course," Alec said in a resigned voice. "We have a chamber prepared. Have ye eaten dinner?"

"We stopped at the inn."

He read the annoyance in her voice and raised his eyes to the heavens before he smiled and turned his horse.

So Lana Thistle did not arrive to the massive MacKay keep alone. She arrived with nearly a dozen men escorting her. So much for being subtle.

Alec might have kept his temper, but Cora did not. "Lana Thistle, what the devil do you think you're doing?" she demanded as soon as they walked in. One by one, the guards began to slink away, and even Alec made a hasty retreat as Cora hurried down the stairs with little Maria bouncing on her hip.

"Oh, look at you," Lana cooed as she reached out to take her niece. "You have gotten so big! You're just the most gorgeous thing I have ever laid eyes on."

Even with a gaze that would stop even the toughest highlander in their tracks, Cora handed her niece over. "Do Mother and Father know that you are here?"

“Shouldn’t she be in bed?” Lana asked as she deftly ignored the question. “It’s so late.” Unable to help herself, she yawned.

Her sister narrowed her eyes. “Do you think that’s going to make me feel sorry for you? Acting all exhausted?”

“It’s a yawn,” Lana said with a wry grin as she handed Maria back over to her mother. “A yawn does not mean exhaustion.”

“No, but a trip from England does.” Cora softened her features and then reached over and hugged her tightly. “You have no idea the terror that I felt when I got Connor’s message. What happened, Lana? If it’s Mother and Father, you would have sent a message, so it must be something that you didn’t want them to know about.”

“Nothing happened,” Lana assured her as she returned the hug. Between them, Maria wiggled and protested. “Honestly, I am fine. I just needed to get away from London and get some fresh air. I will write to Mother tomorrow and explain, and I’m sure they’ll be furious, but please let me stay for a week or two. I won’t be any trouble.”

Behind her, Stephen snorted, but Lana ignored it. She would deal with him later.

“All right. Stephen, will you see Lana to her room? I need to feed Maria before putting her back to bed.”

“Aye,” Stephen said before he snagged her elbow and walked her to the opposite staircase. Her heart pounded in her chest when they were alone, and she waited to see what he would do.

“Ye could have been killed,” he hissed in a low voice as they walked through the halls. “The roads are riddled with highwaymen.”

“I hired skilled footmen,” she said calmly as she jerked her arm away. She was not there to be led around like a child. “We did meet some trouble, but they were so skillfully dispatched that it barely took any time at all.”

“And did those footmen escort ye into the Highlands?” Stephen demanded, knowing full well the answer was no. Lana didn’t possess the kind of wealth it would have taken to hire an Englishman to protect her in the Highlands.

“I rode directly to the Sinclairs with no trouble, and they provided the escort.”

“Lana....”

“Don’t you dare lecture me!” Enough was enough, and she whirled around. “I have seen you, lurking in the shadows, watching me, following me. Obviously everyone around me thinks I cannot handle myself for I have a watchdog escorting me through every season. I intend to put a stop to that right now. I have defended myself before, and I will do so again.”

He stepped closer, and suddenly, everything inside of her melted, and she flushed as desire sparked inside of her. Desire that she didn’t even know existed until that night she stumbled on him after another exhausting and stifling ball. Out in the gardens, she’d escaped to get some air, and there he was, yet again.

Oh, she’d been furious to see him. Without a word, she’d walked right up to him and planted a kiss on his mouth.

Innocent. Naive. She didn’t know the fire she’d been playing with until he’d hauled her up against his hard body and turned that kiss into something more, something wicked, and it had followed her for two years, but he’d never done it again.

“What are ye really here for, my little English lass?” he asked in a husky voice.

Teasingly, she slid her hands up his chest until she could feel his own erratic heartbeat.

And then she shoved, hard, and he stumbled away.

“I am here, Stephen Sinclair, to get away from the prancing idiots of London and snag myself a highlander husband. If you know of any who might be interested, please let me know. Have a good night.”

Then, she slipped into her chambers and closed the door firmly in his face.

A highlander husband.

Stephen gritted his teeth and rode like the demons were chasing him. It was the third night in a row that he had taken the night shift for the perimeter patrols, and he knew that Alec was questioning his reasons, but he could not sit across from Lana Thistle at the table and watch her flirt with the men. He could not look at the window at night and not wonder if he was going to have to tie himself to the bed to keep from going to hers. He could not see her in the early morning, the sun glistening on her lovely blonde hair, and not wish viciously that he could kiss her again.

So he stayed as far away from her as he could. If Cora had any sense in her head, she would send her sister straight back to England to her comfortable life where everyone adored her.

At the end of his shift, he rode his stallion until they were both exhausted, so he did not give in to his desire to haunt the halls of the keep in hopes of catching a glimpse of her. To his surprise, when he reached the stables, he found Cora and Alec preparing their own mounts. It was just a few hours after dawn, far too early for them to be out.

“Everything all right?”

“Stephen, just the man we were looking for!” Cora’s face lit up with delight as she mounted her horse. “Alec and I are going to take a few hours for ourselves. Mary is watching the children, but I know Lana had her heart set on a ride this morning. She wants to explore the ruins of the old keep. Would you escort her? I don’t think she knows the way.”

“Me?” Damnation. “Is there someone else?”

“Cora, Stephen has been out all night,” Alec reminded her. “We’ll ask Kane.”

Cora nodded. “That’s a wonderful idea.”

The hell it was. If Lana was determined to seduce her way to a highland husband, it was not going to be Kane MacKay. “I’m not tired,” he said shortly. “I’ll take her.”

His laird shot him a dubious look. "Are ye sure?" Stephen nodded shortly, and Alec shrugged. "All right, I was going to give ye the night off anyhow. We will be done by noon."

"Or not," Cora said with a sly giggle.

It was hard not to see what was going on here. Alec and Cora, with a toddler at their heels during the day, an infant crying in the night, and a clan to maintain, didn't find much alone time anymore. Obviously, they planned to make up for lost time that morning.

Dismounting, he rubbed his stallion down, fed him, and left to go find Lana.

Knocking on her door, he was stunned when she opened it hastily with a relieved smile on her face.

She was half-dressed.

"Lana," he said stupidly as he eagerly drank her in. She had shimmied into her dress, a lovely dark green, and had worked her arms into the sleeves, but the shoulders sagged over her arms, and she clutched the bodice at her chest. One tug, and he'd have her nearly naked.

Her eyes widened, and she squeaked. "Stephen. I thought you were Emily. She was supposed to come help me dress, but it's been nearly an hour. I can't do the buttons myself."

Male voices lingered in the hall and drew closer. Soon, they'd have company. Without thinking, he maneuvered himself inside and quickly shut the door before more people got an eyeful of her.

"Turn around," he said gruffly, and when she complied, he instantly regretted it. In Scotland, women dressed for the cold, and there was no way that the thin chemise she wore under her dress would protect her from anything. Before he did something that he truly regretted, he roughly pulled her dress up before doing the buttons.

Every time his knuckles skimmed along her back, she shivered.

"What are you doing here?" she said finally. "I haven't seen you in days."

"Patrolling. Night shift. Saw Cora. She wanted me to take you to the

ruins. Said you were planning on going today.” Great. Now he could barely string a coherent sentence together. His fingers seemed to grow even thicker as he wrestled with the buttons.

It wasn’t the only thing thickening.

“Cora said I wanted to go to the ruins today?” Lana said carefully. “That was kind of her.”

Finally, he was finished, though he could not help but take another second to gently run his hand through the strands of her hair. Why the bloody hell wasn’t it up in a braid? Was she trying to kill him?

Then, furious with himself, he quickly took care of the problem for her, winding her thick strands into a simple twist before he tossed it over her shoulder. She caught it quickly and turned to stare at him.

“Ribbon?” he asked her.

“Right. I suppose you get your practice from undoing women’s braids and their dresses.” Her cheeks pinked a little at the words, but she didn’t lower her gaze as she snagged a ribbon from the dress and hastily tied the end of her braid.

The brazen lass was going down a dangerous road. “Actually, I had a younger sister that I raised on my own, but ’tis interesting that is what is on yer mind.”

“Everyone always talks about Jamie being the dangerous one, but Jamie was not the one who kissed me senseless two years ago.”

So she did remember the kiss. Good. It was a kiss that haunted him. Those soft lips. The sweet taste of her mouth. The little whimper caught in her throat.

For two years, he’d obsessed over little more than Lana Thistle and the kiss he’d stolen from her. While she was on English soil, he told himself that he would not touch her again. She was destined to be a countess or a duchess.

But she wasn’t on English soil anymore, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep his hands off her.

“Lana. What did ye come here for?”

She gave him the prettiest smile. “I told you. To find a highland husband.”

“Why?”

“Because I want someone to look at me the way that Alec looks at Cora.”

“And no one in England does that?” They were all idiots if that was the case.

“No.” She frowned. “Cora used to think that she would ruin my seasons because of her mother, but ever since people found out that I was related, if not by blood but by love, to a powerful highland laird, they’ve been falling all over themselves to impress me, to wed me, to trap me. I have had enough.”

“Ye think here, in Scotland, ’twill be any different? We play into politics, lass, and here, we play for keeps. Or have ye forgotten how Alec and Cora wed? The clans know how Alec cares for ye.”

Lana just shrugged. “I’ll know if someone wants me for Alec’s power.” Brazenly, she reached out and touched his chest. “Or if someone wants me for me.”

She was playing with fire. No one knew that he was in her room. He could pull her down to the bed, hike up her skirts, and play out the fantasy that he’d been having since she was eighteen years old.

“Open the door. If the hall is empty, I’ll take ye to the kitchens for some breakfast and then we’ll ride out to the ruins.”

Batting her eyes, she grinned. “No chaperone.”

“Ye forget, I have been watching ye for three years now. I know just what quick work ye make of chaperones.”

With a smirk, she opened the door and walked out.



Her dress twisted around her sated body, Cora curled up around her husband and sighed with pleasure. “Do you think we’ve made the

wrong decision with Stephen?”

Beneath her, Alec growled. “I think if ye are thinking of Stephen and not of me, then I did something verra wrong. Perhaps we should try again.”

“Be serious,” she laughed as she propped herself up and stared down at the man she was so in love with. Their future was turning out to be everything she’d never thought she’d have for herself, and it was because of this incredibly wonderful and terrifying man. “I know that you’ve been sending him to watch over Lana.”

Alec immediately grimaced. “Do ye now?”

“I’m not angry. I know that you didn’t want me to worry and would have told me if something terrible was happening to her. I’m pleased that you love her like a sister as well, but I know that something happened between them. When Lana is here, she usually can’t stop looking at him, and now she’s here, all boldness and fire. I know the look in her eyes well.”

Gently easing her to the side, Alec rolled her over so that she was sprawled on the blanket beneath him. After two children, she’d been worried about the changes in her body and still being able to please him, but he’d run his hands over every curve, licked every stretch mark on her body, and had vibrated with pleasure.

“If Stephen had bedded her, he would have wed her. ’Tis as simple as that. I would not have sent any other man.”

“I am not saying it went that far, but Stephen looks at her too. It’s clear they love each other, but he’s never not gone after something he wanted. If he wants Lana, why doesn’t he court her? Perhaps we should not have set them up together.”

“Always overthinking things.” Lovingly, he brushed the hair from her face. “If he didn’t want to be with Lana, he would have let us send Jamie to watch over her.”

Desire bloomed inside of her, and she curved her leg up his. “He better make quick work because her parents will be demanding that we send her home soon.”

“I have no doubt that by tonight, the two of them will be inseparable. How about ye, my love? Are ye ready to go back to the keep?”

“One more,” she whispered as she pulled him in for a kiss.

“’Tis what ye said last time.”

“True, but this time I mean it.”



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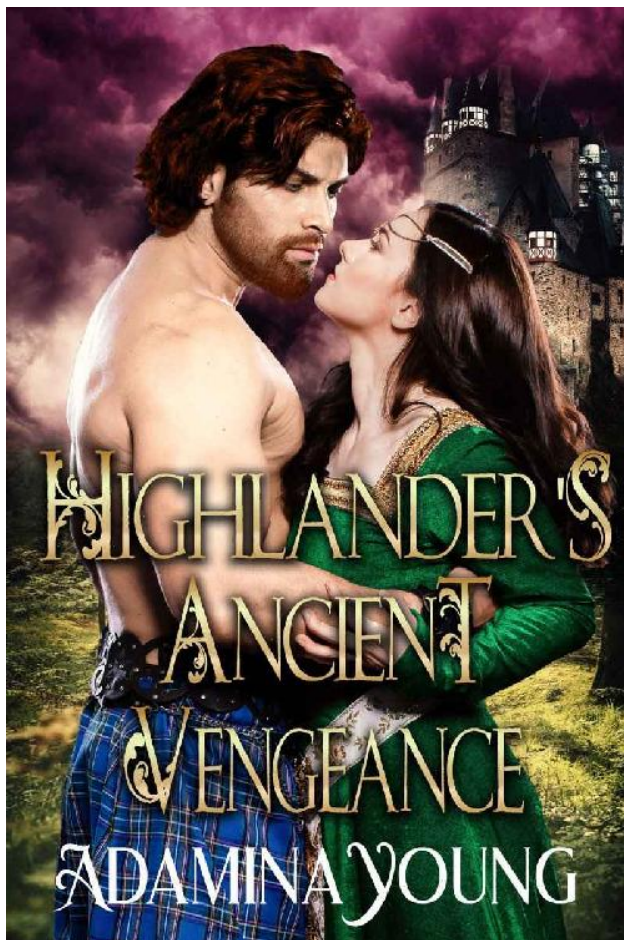
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Prologue

She was furious. This man was one of the Dunbar workers; she knew that because her father had taken her around to meet every one of the men and their wives on the MacEwan estate. And this man was a stranger. She was not going to allow anyone with any connection to the Dunbars to wander about MacEwan land unchallenged!

Malle MacEwan was an expert horsewoman. Everyone on the MacEwan estate knew it, but she always looked tiny on top of her big war horse Arthur, whom she had named after the legendary King of the Britons. He was an enormous chestnut beast who was more than a ton of bulging muscles and had hooves the size of dinner plates. He would let no one else ride him but Malle, and with her, he was as gentle as a newborn lamb.

He did not look gentle now, though. Malle was in pursuit of a trespasser who had the temerity to venture onto MacEwan land, no doubt to poach the deer there. Some thieves had even tried to poach the wild boars, but those fearsome tusked pigs could take care of themselves, and it took a brave man to tackle one.

However, this man was not brave. Malle had heard him as she walked Arthur down to the burn to drink, and sat behind him to watch him squatting behind a bush and peering through the trees. She peered through the trunks of the closely-spaced pine trees to see what he was doing, but he seemed to be trying to make himself disappear, cowering behind a bush in terror.

Malle rode forward, then dismounted, confident that the trespasser had not seen her, but when she trod on a twig that broke under her feet, it snapped with a crack that made her flinch. The man looked up, and although his eyes were wide with fear, he moved fast. As Malle

stepped in front of him and tried to block his escape, he gave her a hefty push and she landed on her backside amongst the pine needles, then he jumped onto his horse and urged it forward. It leapt away and put on a surprising burst of speed before Malle had struggled to her feet.

She jumped into the saddle and Arthur sprung forward. The horse in front was smaller and much faster than big powerful Arthur over a short distance, although his sheer muscle power would win out in the end over a longer stretch. Moreover, a thick mist was rising from the waters of the Cut, the stream that separated the two estates, and the other rider was disappearing from sight. They were nearing Dunbar land, and Malle knew that it would be more than her life was worth to put a toe over the boundary. If she did, she was likely to be arrested and thrown into the Dunbar dungeon for as long as the Laird cared to keep her there.

Malle MacEwan was not afraid of many things; she had been trained in riding, swordsmanship, and archery by experts, and could also handle a knife and dagger with ease. There was only one thing in the world that gave her nightmares, and that was being put in a cage, a cell, or any small space from which she could not escape.

She could see that the boundary of the Dunbar land was now very close. It was a ten-foot-wide burn called the Cut, because it cut a line between the two estates.

Now I've got him! she thought triumphantly, expecting him to stop at any minute.

However, the smaller horse did not even slow down; it leapt from five feet behind the edge of the bank and landed the same distance away on the other side. Malle's jaw dropped open in surprise even as she scowled with rage. She brought Arthur to a halt at the water's edge and sat, fuming.

"If I ever see you on my father's land again," she said, and her voice throbbed with rage, "I will swipe that ugly head right off your skinny shoulders! Do you hear me?"

The man looked shocked and penitent, but Malle was not sure

whether his expression was genuine. “Why Mistress, it was wee Mairi here.” He patted his horse’s neck. “We were oot rabbit huntin’ an’ ane o’ the wee so-an’-so’s ran in front o’ her an’ gied her a fright. She threw me right on the flair an’ ran aff. Ye saw how she flew ower the burn—she jumped right intae your side o’ the fence. I went tae get her back, she is my only horse. I’m awfy sorry.”

“A most interesting tale,” Malle said dryly, cocking her head to one side and folding her arms. “Unfortunately, I do not believe it. I believe you were about for some less than honest purpose of your own.” Her voice was harsh.

The man shrugged and spread his hands. “I wis tellin’ ye the truth. I never tell a lie.” His face looked long and doleful.

Malle ignored the self-pitying whine of his voice. She sat looking at him for a while; he was an undersized creature with a small, sad face. “What is your name?” she demanded.

The man opened his mouth to answer, but someone else did it for him.

“His name is Fergus McDowell,” said a deep, gravelly voice. The owner of the voice came striding out of the mist. It was Craig Dunbar, the tall, strapping heir to the Dunbar estate, and judging by the thunderous scowl on his face, he did not look happy to see her.

Chapter 1 - Confrontation

Craig Dunbar's reputation preceded him, and looking at him, Malle could see why. Due to his extended stay in Aberdeen, she had not seen Craig since he was in his teens and she was a little girl, even though their estates were very close to each other. Even then it was only from a distance, since the Dunbars and MacEwans did not mix.

When he was eighteen and she was nine. He had seemed enormous, even though he had been much shorter than he was now. However, this was a different Craig; now he had grown taller and broadened out to become the epitome of masculinity.

He was well over six feet tall, with shoulders that suggested that he could plow a field or heft tree trunks on his own. She could not see his arms under his shirt, but she would wager that they were powerfully muscled, as were the calves she could see below his kilt.

His shoulder-length hair was a fiery shade of red, as was his closely-shaved beard, and he would have been attractive enough to give her palpitations had it not been for the forbidding scowl on his face. His feet were planted widely apart and his arms folded defensively across his body as he glared at her, and even though there was a small river separating them, she felt a twinge of uneasiness. He was a very big man, and she was tiny by comparison—in fact, she was a very small woman by any standards.

"Fine horse, Mistress MacEwan," he began. "I'll wager he was not cheap." His voice had a ring of sardonic amusement even though the fearsome expression on his face remained the same.

She was stung into retaliation at once. "The value of my horse is no business of yours, Dunbar!" she snapped, not giving him the courtesy of his title as Laird Dunbar the Younger.

She saw his jaw tighten and his brow descend even further, and she felt an unholy surge of satisfaction. He might be as strong as an oak tree, but she had not yet met a man who could defeat her in a battle of words. And she was sure that Craig Dunbar would not fare any better than any of the others who had taken her on.

"I caught your man on my land," Malle said angrily, pointing at Fergus, then at the thick branch he had used as a bridge to walk across the stream. "Up to no good, no doubt. I managed to stop him just in time. Did you send him?"

Malle had the satisfaction of seeing him bristle with anger. "NO I DID NOT!" he bellowed. He made himself calm down with a visible effort, but Malle gave him a grim smile which would have stoked his fury again had he not given vent to it with a mighty roar of rage.

"Really, Dunbar," she said, with deep condescension, "you must learn to control your temper. It is not a fitting example to your workers."

Craig ran his hand back through his thick russet hair, then put his arm around Fergus's shoulders. They both turned their backs on her and began to converse in low voices for some minutes, while Arthur lowered his head to the water and began to quench his thirst, unconcerned with the whole affair.

Malle looked at the sky. It was clouding over again, and soon there would be a torrential downpour. She hoped she could put an end to this dispute peacefully before she had to go home.

Just then, both men turned back towards her.

"MacEwan," Craig said sarcastically, echoing her disdainful mode of address, "Fergus has been a loyal employee of my father's for as long as I can remember. I have known him since I was a boy, and if he said he was not about to commit a crime on your land, then he was not."

"Do you swear that you were not?" she asked Fergus sharply.

Fergus's expression changed to one of alarm. He was a religious man, as were most people, and he knew that lying under oath was a mortal sin, punishable by eternal damnation. Guilty or innocent, swearing an oath was a terrifying thing to do. He began to cough loudly, and Craig

slapped him on the back, but it did not seem to help much. His face had turned bright red and there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

When he had finished, he stood up straight and held up his hand. "I swear that I didnae want tae poach yer animals or steal yer sheep or cattle or dae onythin' else Mistress," Fergus said wheezily. "I am no' a well man jist at the minute."

"What do you say to that, MacEwan?" Craig asked triumphantly, with an unpleasant smile.

"Fergus McDowell, look at me," Malle commanded. The man did not raise his eyes.

"LOOK AT ME!" she roared, bending forward in her saddle as if to get closer to him.

He looked up timidly, and her eyes stared at him so intently that it seemed she would bore a hole in his forehead.

"If you are lying to me under oath, then God will punish you for it." Her voice was a low warning growl. "You will roast in hell for all eternity. But you may thank Him that it was I who saw you, and not my father or any of his workers, because you would be rotting in my father's dungeon even as we speak. You may lie to your Laird and lie to me, but you cannot lie to He who made you!"

"He is not lying." Craig's deep voice sounded angry. "I trust him."

Fergus gave Craig a look of deep gratitude.

"Then, Dunbar, you will not mind if I swear too." She dismounted from Arthur and stood on the bank of the burn directly across from him. Then, raising her hand, she said in a clear, firm voice, "I swear that if I ever catch this man on my land again he will be arrested immediately and thrown into the dungeon. That goes for *any* Dunbar worker who sets foot here."

For a moment, Craig was dumbfounded. He had expected this little woman to back down and give up, but it appeared that she was made of sterner stuff. After her last riposte, he studied her more closely; she was not a big woman. In fact, he reckoned that she was almost a foot

shorter than he was and so delicately built that she looked like an elf. Her every feature suggested fragility. She had small hands and feet, a heart-shaped face, large eyes, and long dark hair swept up on top of her head showing her swan-like neck. Everything about her looked delicately feminine except for the ferocity of her attitude, which befitted a man of his own stature.

She was still waiting for a reply when he realized suddenly that he was staring at her. He shook his head as if to clear it of unwelcome thoughts, then replied, "I reserve the right to swear too, MacEwan. If one of your people trespasses on my land they will be very, very sorry indeed."

Malle gave a cynical laugh. "That is just what my father told me about you Dunbars," she observed, shaking her head. "You will do anything to safeguard your land and wealth, even at the expense of others. You are a crowd of unscrupulous bandits." Malle knew that she was accusing Craig of the same thing she was doing herself, but she chose to ignore it.

"MacEwan, you have no idea what you are talking about," he sighed, giving her a pitying smile. "Go home and play with your dollies. I have no more time to waste with you."

She gave him an exaggerated mocking curtsy, before tossing her last insult across the stream at him. "Swine!" Then she turned Arthur around and headed back home.

Craig stood watching her as she cantered into the distance. His feelings were wavering between anger and admiration. He was not sure whether she was telling the truth, but surely a noble lady like Malle MacEwan would not risk her immortal soul on so trivial a matter!

However, he had known Fergus for years, and had no reason to doubt his word either, and he was not likely to meet the lovely Malle again in the near future, whereas he had to meet and work with Fergus frequently. Nevertheless, she was fascinating, and he thought about her all the way home.

Malle had no such charitable thoughts about Craig. He had been rude,

discourteous, and had questioned her honesty. He deserved no respect, and she would not waste her time thinking about him. She tried to ignore the fact that he was a very attractive man; in her eyes his fearsome size made him a bully. Besides, he had a reputation as a brawler and a philanderer, and her disrespect for him knew no bounds.

She went on with her journey, trying to empty her mind of Craig Dunbar to think about the new dress she was having made for her birthday. It was made of beautiful rust-colored velvet, and fitted her like a second skin. Her mother, Margaret MacEwan, had given her an amber brooch and earrings to wear with it, determined that her daughter should look like a princess. Amber always enhanced the color of her eyes, which were the subtle gray-green color of sage leaves.

She had almost managed to put Craig Dunbar to the back of her mind when she walked into the dining room and met her father.



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About the Author

Since she was a child, Adamina was inspired by stories of true love overcoming every obstacle! So, she started writing her first book at the age of 23!

A few years later, she met her own “Highlander” During their honeymoon, they decided to travel to Scotland. And then everything changed...

Adamina LOVES to connect with her readers, and reads all the messages she gets!

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